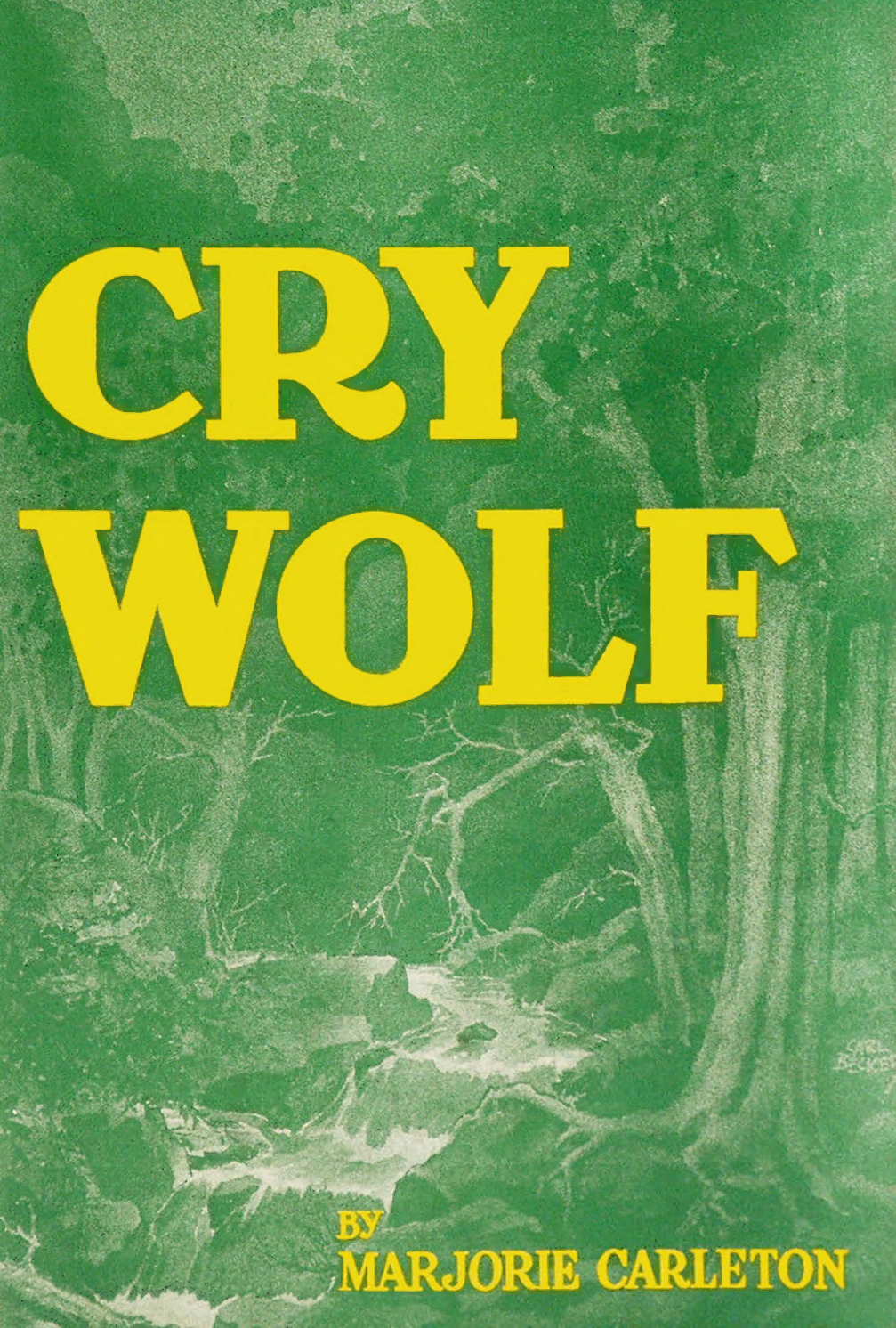
CRY WOLF



BY
MARJORIE CARLETON

$2.50

Here is a novel with tense atmosphere and ominous undercurrents—a breathless story that moves from uncertainty through suspense to sheer terror.

CRY WOLF

By MARJORIE CARLETON

AUTHOR OF "*LORINDA*," ETC.

Mark Caldwell sat at the far end of the room, somewhat annoyed, obviously forbidding, and definitely puzzled. Sandra Marshall moved swiftly over the deep soft carpet. "My married name is Mrs. James Caldwell Demarest," she said. "I am your nephew's widow."

With that bombshell, Sandra made her entrance to Willow Miles, Jim's

(continued on back flap)

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Cry Wolf

By MARJORIE CARLETON

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To Jay

1

SHE DODGED AGILELY through the Harvard Square traffic though the portfolio struck her knee smartly at every other step. One had to be agile in this chaos, so the pleated skirt above the long slim legs swirled autumn-brown among the cars, eddying and subsiding like a bewitched maple leaf. She reached the safety of her street and fell into an easier stride. The twilight, unlike the permanent dusk of the Peabody Museum from which she had emerged, was punctuated with the late fall scent, with the dried crackle of forgotten bonfires, and with windows whose glow was discreetly muted yet somehow unmistakable, like a suppressed laugh.

Sandra was almost reluctant to leave the street and start up the rambling walk that led to her grandfather's house. It was a famous walk, of course, and she had been reminded since childhood that its bricks were already warping with age when Longfellow had paid his first weekly visit. Grandfather, poor dear, was a bit of a snob intellectually. That judgment brought a smile to her wide red mouth and she burst into the house chanting at the top of her voice, "Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, 1807 to 1882! Give me an A plus, Dr. Marshall. Did you ever know me to remember exact dates before?"

Her grandfather's voice came with subdued petulance from his usual place by the library fire. "My dear Sandra, must you always greet me at night in some totally unexpected and absurd fashion?"

"Good for your circulation, darling." Sandra was unabashed

as she crossed the room and kissed the top of his head. The fine-spun silver of his hair reached in groomed and shining vanity to his black velvet shoulders. "At ninety-two you should be annoyed at least once a day."

"Last night," he went on with frigid distaste, "it was a strange and abominable little kitten that you dropped on my lap without any warning whatsoever."

"I see it's right back there again," Sandra said calmly. "Don't you think it's about time for at least one lamp?"

"I do indeed. Perhaps you would then observe that we have a guest."

Sandra paused an unstartled second, then switched on a lamp as a man came forward from the shadow of the bay window where he had been standing. He was blond, boyish and intense. All these things struck her as she murmured an apologetic, "Oh, I'm frightfully sorry."

"Sandra, this is James Caldwell Demarest, son of a former student of mine."

She shook hands—students generally expected that—and added resignedly, "You'll stay for dinner, of course?" They always did. Sometimes she thought that at one time or another her grandfather must have dined all of Harvard Yard. But young Mr. Demarest shook his head.

"No," he said, "no," on an odd, breathless note. "Thanks just the same. I simply wanted to consult your grandfather on a personal matter."

"Well, then, if you'll excuse me." Sandra pulled her scarf from sleek bronze hair and turned to leave the room, but Dr. Marshall halted her.

"Don't go. We want your advice, Jim and I, on a rather strange situation." His hand was as composed as ever as he

stroked the kitten but Sandra recognized the sparkle in his eyes. What's he up to now, she wondered suspiciously. In her experience Edward Copley Marshall, even at ninety-two, was very apt to be up to something. "Would you like me to tell her?" Dr. Marshall asked his guest, who had moved back again into the shadows beyond the fire, now that Sandra was seated. But he didn't wait for an answer. For one thing, he held that the art of exposition was becoming extinct, and trusted it to no one else.

"You were always weak in remembering family trees, Sandra, but it's simple enough. This lad Jim is named for his father, James Demarest, now deceased. His mother was Ellen Caldwell, also deceased. Jim and his young sister are therefor wards of his maternal uncle, Mark Caldwell."

"Wards?" Sandra raised polite eyebrows. "I hadn't thought you so young, Mr. Demarest."

Dr. Marshall was irritable. "Don't quibble. His sister who is only seventeen, is still a ward. Jim, of course, is his own master. Except as far as his inheritance is concerned. I'm coming to that. The Caldwells are an immensely wealthy family, all of them. Or were," he cackled suddenly, "before this fellow Morgenthau began picking pockets. Jim's mother left him over two million dollars, and his sister about half that amount."

These were astronomical figures and Sandra sat calmly under them. Now if her grandfather had mentioned one thousand, all that she would need for the whole five months of the field expedition to Mexico, . . . Her eyes dreamed.

"The trouble is this," her grandfather went on sharply and Sandra jumped, "according to his mother's will, Jim receives only an allowance until he is thirty, or married. He wants control of his capital now, but he's just twenty-four."

"Well, that's simple. Why don't you get married, Mr. Demarest?"

The young voice replied hoarsely and gloomily from the shadows. "I've been engaged. My fiancée broke it off with hardly a word of explanation. I have reason to think my uncle was responsible."

Even at twenty-two, Sandra was healthily sceptical. "Why should he want to break up your engagement?"

Dr. Marshall moved so suddenly that the kitten squeaked and jumped from his lap. "Really, Sandra, concentrate! As soon as Jim marries, his uncle will lose control over two million dollars."

"But you said the Caldwells were all wealthy."

"So they are. But Mark Caldwell is a scientist."

"Oh," Sandra nodded. That answered her question. No scientist knew anything about money except that he needed a lot of it and never had enough. Never. "What's his line?" she asked idly.

"Chemistry. His laboratory's in the house. He's doing some government work now. Very hush-hush, you know." Jim Demarest's voice sounded a bit sullen as though she had sidetracked him.

She caught the tone and her voice was gentle. "You and grandfather want me to hear about your problem, so don't mind if I comment. I gather you only have suspicions of your uncle. Time generally clears up such things." He came forward then into the lamplight and his hands were clenched.

"There's such a thing as giving time too much rope. I've been turned down by all the services here—a foot damaged when I was a kid. Just the same, I'm pretty sure I can enlist in Canada. But I don't dare. I literally don't dare go away

leaving Uncle Mark in control of my money. Now if I married before I enlisted . . ."

"A strange and probably unscrupulous wife would have control instead of your uncle," Sandra interrupted briskly.

Demarest leaned toward her over the table. "My wife would be strange, naturally," he said slowly, "for I don't even know who she'll be yet. But I have hopes that she wouldn't be unscrupulous. It's for advice on this, that I've come to Dr. Marshall. I was young when my father died, but I remember him speaking of your grandfather again and again. And I'm beginning to have more faith in my father's judgment than in my poor mother's."

There was a little silence and then Dr. Marshall spoke mildly. "It may sound a bit impractical, Sandra, but it's Jim's idea that he should marry some respectable young woman under a verbal agreement that she will divorce him after six months for desertion. You see, he really would desert her immediately after the ceremony. For this assistance in helping him gain control of his own money, Jim proposes to settle ten thousand upon this young woman at once, from his allowance."

Sandra's lips curled a little satirically. "Rather an ample allowance. Wicked uncles must have changed since I read fairy tales. Where are you going to find this paragon of respectability and cupidity? Matrimonial bureau?"

"That's where I come in," her grandfather said. "To advise him on the young woman he should select." His tone was complacent, and Sandra burst out laughing.

"You fraud! Do you entertain dashing damsels all day while I grub in the Museum?" Then she stood up and her face sobered. "Don't think I'm unsympathetic, Mr. Demarest.

But I'm afraid I can't be very helpful. You've talked to grandfather at length and he knows a hundred details that it would bore you both to go over again. But I couldn't possibly contribute any advice, knowing as little as I do. So if you'll excuse me I think I'll brush up a bit before dinner."

Dr. Marshall raised a slim hand, almost as silvery and transparent as his hair. "What do you want to know, Sandra? Specifically?"

A sense of uneasiness gripped her and her tone was curt because of it. "Well really, grandfather, why doesn't Mr. Demarest consult lawyers? Surely his uncle has to render regular trustee's reports! The whole thing sounds so foggy and fantastic and early Victorian."

And the two of them look it too, she thought suddenly: grandfather, as ivory and exquisite as a Regency cameo, and this blond youngster with his Byronic and imaginary tragedies. She smiled maternally at the latter. "Go ahead and enlist and forget this marriage business. I'm only twenty-two, but take it from me: any girl who'd marry a stranger for such mercenary reasons shouldn't be trusted half as much as you'd trust your uncle."

James Demarest nodded slowly and she noted that his eyelashes were as thick and pale as flax above the intense blue eyes. "I've thought of that," he said. "That's why I didn't canvass any casual acquaintances, but came to your grandfather instead." He hesitated. "Perhaps the right type of girl could think of it this way: that if I died in the service, she had helped to make my sister independent. For Julie will be my principal beneficiary." Sandra's face was still noncommittal and he went on. "May I change my mind and stay for dinner after all? Perhaps this evening you'd let me give you a little

more rounded picture." His eyelids were heavy now as though he were suddenly tired. "Through circumstances beyond my control I have no real friends, but my father told me that no one ever left this door without having been helped."

"Of course you can stay and tell me all about it," Sandra said. And then, because the atmosphere was a bit too tense, added with a twinkle, "I must warn you about the way grandfather helps people. It's by seeing to it that they do exactly as they want regardless of convention or morality. That's why everyone leaves here as happy as a cricket, and then spends a lifetime wondering how he could have gotten into such hot water after such excellent advice from the eminent Dr. Marshall!"

Her grandfather leaned down and picked the kitten up from its box. It batted at his hands with infinitesimal needles. "A touch of malice is as becoming to a woman as claws are to a kitten, Demarest," he commented placidly. "We must let her exercise it occasionally, keeping well out of reach, of course. By the way, Sandra, you haven't spoken of it lately, but I was wondering today . . ."

"Yes?"

"Is it this month or next that the field expedition to Mexico starts out?"

The next night Sandra brought a glass of hot milk to her grandfather's bedside and set it down with a thump on the table. For once she did not gaze away as he adjusted his teeth in a furtive little scurry, but glared at him relentlessly.

"Mr. Demarest just phoned and wants to see me alone tomorrow," she announced. "I won't have you throwing me at his head, do you hear?"

"He asked you to call him Jim."

"I'm tempted to call him all sorts of things. You, too. Why are you encouraging him in this crazy scheme?"

"His mind was all made up before he saw me," Dr. Marshall defended. "You know that. He's the most intense, determined youngster I've ever seen." He punched the pillow to bring his head higher. "Sandra, he's going to marry someone."

"Well, it won't be me!" Her ungrammatical defiance brought no correction and she sat on the edge of the bed and stared at him curiously. "Grandfather, does money mean so much to you? It doesn't to me."

He closed his eyes. "Then you are a fool," he said quietly. "If I had had money for my private research fifty years ago, I'd have been another Pasteur, instead of a doddering crock living on the fringes of the University's generosity."

"Darling, you're famous!"

"Famous for theory, not proof. Proof takes money." His mouth twisted ironically and he opened his eyes. "I have never wanted nor acquired money by illicit means, Sandra. Your marriage to Jim would not be illicit in any way. . . . No, wait a moment. A young man wants his inheritance, is entitled to it. And a certain young woman could use ten thousand dollars to secure her future and her career. No personal relationship is involved, now nor later. Only a few words in a registrar's office."

Sandra said slowly, "Most women expect those few words to mean something."

Dr. Marshall sipped his milk and his tone was indifferent. "Good. Then you would never consider divorce nor even separation if some time you marry a man who later turns out to be a complete scoundrel."

"Well, I don't know about that." Sandra was a little subdued and shifted hastily from that unknown territory. "You seem to be sure Jim's story is true."

"Some of it is, at any rate. I've made extensive inquiries today. The money is there all right, and it goes to Jim and his sister as he says. But I'm a bit dubious as to whether his ideas of his uncle are correct."

"You made inquiries? What's Mr. Caldwell like?"

"Which Mr. Caldwell? I find there are two. Senator Charles Caldwell, fifty-one, formerly a corporation lawyer, now a rather substantial prospect for higher political office. The Supreme Court, no less."

Sandra uttered an exclamation. "But a man like that wouldn't dare! I mean, why should he take a chance of ruining himself by something shady?"

"He's not the uncle to whom Jim refers," Dr. Marshall said placidly. "There's another Caldwell, much younger than his brother. Only thirty-six, I believe. He's the trustee."

"How did he happen to be chosen instead of the Senator?"

"How do I know? Closer to his sister, perhaps. And besides, Washington isn't the easiest place to bring up a pair of youngsters."

"What's he like?" Sandra asked again, with a little premonitory stir of uneasiness.

"A chemical genius, apparently. Professor Langdon speaks of him with positive reverence. A certain government official has asked the University to allow Caldwell to use its every facility and, if need be, with utmost privacy. I hope you understand the implications in that, Sandra. Of course he has an exceedingly well-equipped laboratory of his own, though no one's been invited to visit it lately. War work."

Sandra looked thoughtful. "He doesn't seem to be any more likely as an embezzler than the Senator. Yet when Jim went into more detail last night, he almost had me convinced."

Dr. Marshall's eyes dreamed. "If you married Jim, I'd no doubt have an entrée to Caldwell's laboratory."

"Don't forget that divorce is part of the contract," Sandra reminded him cruelly and his mouth drooped. She went on. "It seems odd that if Jim is determined to get married, he wouldn't go to someone he knew, whose background he knew."

Dr. Marshall lifted his eyebrows. "Where is this famous woman's intuition? Let us consider the facts, or what Jim says are the facts. He has already been jilted very abruptly by a young woman who was a part of his circle of friends. Obviously he is anxious to go outside that circle to avoid humiliating gossip. And if it is true that his uncle did break up his engagement, all the more reason to pick a strange young woman who couldn't be approached by Mr. Caldwell."

Sandra nodded uncertainly.

"Yet he doesn't want to fall into blackmailing or vulgar hands. In ordinary circumstances he might turn to the clergy for advice. But the Church would be most hostile to this particular idea. In desperation he remembered that his father had spoken of me. Here, Jim says to himself, is an ancient wise man—" Dr. Marshall's lips quirked in amusement, "—who will advise me without fear, and expect no favor; a man who has lived in a university town and who doubtless knows many families with impecunious, dowdy and respectable daughters."

Sandra laughed merrily. "Thank you."

"He may or may not have known that I myself have a granddaughter. I doubt it. But you pleased him, particularly with

your apparent obtuseness. Even in the circumstances, the male prefers the aggressive role."

"Oh, grandfather!" Sandra's tone was exasperated as she stood up, and going to the window lifted it to release a night moth. A dried leaf blew in and rustled dully against her hand. She picked it up and looked at it absently. Yes, it would be winter soon with grandfather cooped up in a drafty house instead of sunning his old bones in Florida. Winter soon, and she herself patiently classifying and sorting in the Museum while other graduates were gathering material and experience in Mexico. Mexico—what would they find in Mexico?

She walked back to the bed and stared at her grandfather as the leaf drifted from her fingers. "I suspect that curiosity, not money, is the greatest driving power in some people," she commented.

Dr. Marshall said with sudden passion, "Of course it is! What would the world be like without the men and women who have demanded to know, to find out, to investigate, to prove! And who haven't been too conventional in accepting their opportunities!"

His eyes fell before hers and he picked up the leaf, crumbling it neatly and anatomically. "You musn't pay too much attention to me, my dear," he said. "My mental processes are still whole, but as attenuated as this structure." He held the leaf up, its spidery skeleton still precise and intact, and added painfully, "My mind, like this leaf, still has some integrity but no substance. This brown dust—" with a lean forefinger he stirred the snuff-like powder which had fallen to the spread "is the end of the heart, the life, the flesh of the leaf. I believe you grasp my analogy and my apology?"

Sandra nodded. "You're trying to say that your intelligence

is eager for me to marry Jim, so I can get ahead faster in my work. But that you've forgotten what a woman may feel as a woman and so I must make my own decision. And that—"

"Never belabor a metaphor," Dr. Marshall interrupted acidly. "We understand each other." His tone was final. "And now will you bring me my magnifying glass? I'm afraid I've neglected the pleasures of botany. The leaf skeleton is, if I remember correctly, called a venation."

It is such a placid landscape in comparison with Mexico's, Sandra thought as she watched the New England April unwind slowly along the train windows. Her usually fair skin was a smooth deep tan scarcely lighter than her hair, so that the other passengers, stealing surreptitious looks, became conscious of their own pallid, just-after-the-winter faces. Yet Sandra would have been pale, except for the tan. She felt pale. Those months in Mexico had been memorable, yet she shouldn't have gone. How could she have forgotten that grandfather was ninety-two, and that even a mild cold could strike disastrously at that age?

Yet she had forgotten. She had gone to Mexico. It was little comfort that the doctors said she had returned in time. Had she? Was he really safe now as they had assured her? Her heart shook a little as she thought of him lying there in the little Florida bungalow. He had looked so still, so spent—the venation of a leaf. Did those nurses understand the fragility they were handling, and that he was all Sandra had? Even as she had crossed the plane gangplank, she had almost turned back. But she hadn't, because of him. If he had been well enough to have been told what had happened he would have ordered her to go. It was part of the pact that he, as well

as Sandra, had made with Jim. After all, it was Jim's money that had kept grandfather alive, that was keeping him alive.

Once the two of them would have bent their heads together over this clipping she held in her hand. Now she had to face alone a situation that at best would be awkward, at worst tragic. The clipping was ordinary enough in its contents. It simply announced that James Caldwell Demarest, aged 24, had died at his uncle's home in Reed's Crossing after a brief illness. Funeral services, attended only by the immediate family, would be held Thursday; flowers omitted, by request.

Yes, ordinary enough so far. But here were the lines that had caused Sandra's presence on this Wednesday afternoon train which would eventually pause a moment at Reed's Crossing.

"He is survived by his sister, Miss Julia Demarest, and by his two maternal uncles, Mark Caldwell, eminent scientist, and Senator Charles Caldwell, recently mentioned in connection with a Supreme Court vacancy." There was brief mention of the deceased's clubs and former collegiate activities; a cautious speculation as to the probable size of his estate. That was all.

Sandra put the clipping back into her bag for the third time and stared out the window. No mention that James Demarest had been married nearly five months. No mention that he had enlisted in Canada. Had he given up the latter idea or had he been taken ill while on leave? What had happened to his plans? What had happened to that apparently air-tight will that he and her grandfather had so painstakingly prepared? She had a copy in her capacious handbag. Could it be that Jim had never deposited the original with a bank or attorney?

And in any event, why hadn't he told his family, his uncle, of his marriage? Wasn't that the whole point of the marriage?

Her mind kept running like a squirrel in a cage. Let's see, if Jim hadn't married, his inheritance would have automatically gone to his sister. There again, Julia's uncle had complete control of her capital until she married or reached thirty. The conditions were even harder in her case. If she married without her guardian's consent before her thirtieth birthday, all but a modest annual income would go to the Caldwell Research Foundation.

The train sighed and halted and Sandra rose. She caught a glimpse of herself in the car window. Smart black suit with a hint of beige ruffle at the throat, a shade repeated in the loose gloves; an expensively demure hat. Not bad at all, even if a ruffle at the throat together with her slanting eyes made her look a bit like a prize Persian. A pity her mouth wasn't Persian, little and mewing and sleek. But it always betrayed her with its width and candour. She stepped to the platform and stood looking about her uncertainly as the train pulled away. Actually she wasn't uncertain. She was quite sure in fact that the middle-aged man who had alighted also was Senator Charles Caldwell. One couldn't mistake that resemblance to Warren Harding, nor that pleasantly vague look that had wandered past her, the look of the man in public life who is fearful of ignoring some constituent. When she didn't clutch at that look, his face had settled again into heavy-jowled preoccupation.

She tried the station door, which was firmly locked, stared at the rolling and empty country landscape, then walked toward the Senator. "Could you tell me whether there is any taxi service here?"

He hurriedly replaced a still unlighted cigar. "I'm sorry, we haven't such service. But someone's calling for me," he indicated a limousine that was turning into the parking space, "and we'd be glad to drop you wherever you like."

Sandra hesitated for the proper length of time, then said, "It would be good of you, if Willow Miles isn't too far out of your way."

"We have the same destination." He smiled and beckoned the chauffeur to pick up their luggage. A few minutes later, as the car settled into its sedate pace, he added comfortably, "I'm Senator Caldwell and I suppose you're a friend of Julie's. Poor child, she does need someone badly now."

Sandra smoothed her gloves. "I don't know Miss Demarest. I'm seeing your brother, Mr. Mark Caldwell, on a business matter."

He turned and stared at her. "I'm afraid there's no chance that he will bother with business matters today. You see the family is in mourning. My nephew is to be buried tomorrow."

"I know," she said quietly. Then as she did not volunteer anything further, his shoulders braced themselves into affronted dignity and there was silence for a time.

Beyond the peak of the hill the scene changed. Lawns expanded into acres of gardens and woodland, and the estates, spaced far apart, scornfully and successfully concealed the very outlines of their private castles. The car was plunging into a valley through which a small river meandered, and now, alongside the road, a procession of willow trees seemed to march with them. "Is your brother's residence called Willow Miles because of trees like these?" The Senator responded to the friendliness of her tone.

"His estate began back there," he conceded a bit grudgingly,

"and lies on either side of us now." Sandra hadn't before realized that tiny New England still held such vast private lands. The silver-blue twilight was already on the valley, and the wooded hills seemed to stretch to infinity. This was what money really meant then: lands, possessions, power. The palms of her hands dampened and she clenched them in self-contempt.

The car slowed its pace and now it turned abruptly left between the jaws of two massive stone posts, and swept past a dimly concealed lodge. In these woods, night was already approaching. It was beginning to grow cold too, with the mist-clinging damp of a valley evening. The Senator must have sensed her involuntary shiver for he came out of his abstraction. "We'll be there shortly," he assured her. "It's a lonesome sort of place at night, isn't it? But gorgeous in the summer and sunlight, and it suits my brother. He's a crank of a scientist, you know," he smiled a little, "but a good chap for all that, so you mustn't mind if he's a bit abrupt. I don't know why I'm assuming that you don't know him," he added suddenly, and when Sandra said that she didn't, "I thought not. He's been a bit of a hermit these last few years. Well, here we are."

Sandra started to her feet as the car stopped. The house had come upon them suddenly, and as she stepped to the ground the massive blackness of it seemed to blot out the pale western horizon. The walls stretched story upon story upwards and the lights of the car seemed to cut only a small segment of ebony from its bulk. The windows were so heavily curtained that they presented an inhospitable blankness. A negro manservant in dark plain livery opened the door, and they were ushered into the great stone hall. The latter was flagged under

foot and only sparsely covered with faded oriental rugs, while at one end of the rectangle a huge fireplace faced the central staircase. This whole area comprised two stories in height, for a narrow balcony could be glimpsed about it, a balcony now shrouded in dimness. Something suggested to Sandra an unwieldy and feudal hunting lodge, and she wondered if her host would reflect his surroundings.

At a murmur from the butler she sank upon an oak settee beside one of the inner doors through which the Senator had already vanished. The log fire across the hall seemed only to emphasize the shadows and chill that lay like permanence upon the rest of the house. The portieres behind her stirred and the Senator reappeared. His face was paler and more grave.

"I've told my brother you've made quite a trip to see him," he said in a voice already attuned to a house of mourning, "and he will see you. We'll probably not meet again as I shall have to return to Washington almost immediately."

For an instant he studied her curiously and then motioned her to the inner room. The girl's fingers tightened on the portieres only fleetingly. Then she entered and the velvet hangings fell noiselessly into place behind her. The room was large, yet the soft glow which radiated from numerous cunningly concealed lights was in startling contrast to the grim bleakness of the outer hall. Although thoroughly masculine in its appointments, the place held a warmth and color that hinted at sybaritic tastes.

Far down the room she saw the man, saw the closely cropped brown hair and the even browner hands which supported his forehead as he bent over some papers on his desk. The rugs were soft and deep, and the girl moved across the space almost

convinced that he was as yet unaware of her presence. Even as she thought this he rose, and touching a chair which faced his, stood looking at her gravely as she advanced the last few steps.

This was Mark Caldwell, the man who, if Jim had been right, would prove her bitter enemy. He was tall, she noted, for he loomed over her and she herself was more than five foot six. He was slim too, with the broad-shouldered leanness of a man to whom athletic activity has been as automatic as breathing. But it was his eyes that held her, for they were a startling slate gray in the duskiness of his face, and they were eyes that held a knowledge and a disillusionment beyond his thirty-six years.

Looking at those eyes Sandra knew, even before he spoke, that Mark Caldwell was clever, that he was shrewd, and that he could be unyielding.

"We are in mourning here," he said quietly, "so I assume your business is important. Please sit down."

Sandra hesitated a second after seating herself and then blurted out the words she had rehearsed so often on the train. "My maiden name is Sandra Marshall," she said, "but my married name is Mrs. James Caldwell Demarest. I'm your nephew's widow."

For a long moment the room held silence, a silence charged with ominous vibrations. Sandra saw in the man's eyes—and she had nerved herself to see that look—an expression of shock, a quick anger beneath which her own eyes held steady. Then he looked past her and his words, when he did speak, conveyed no emotion beyond that of polite incredulity.

"That's a most interesting statement," he said. "Perhaps

our mutual condolences might be postponed until I hear more of the facts."

"I came here to give you the facts," Sandra said just as quietly. "Where shall I start?"

"At the beginning. Take your time. I shan't interrupt."

She nodded and began to speak against the tense, expectant quiet of the room. Sometimes faltering as she suppressed a portion of the truth, sometimes running smoothly with renewed confidence, the deleted story still moved on coherently enough, though it was perhaps fortunate that Mark Caldwell had chosen to study the desk blotter intently instead of fixing those gray eyes on her flushed face. Her first decision to throw all her cards on the table, confront the man defiantly with all Jim had suspected, had been instantly discarded when she actually met Mark Caldwell. It would be foolish to show an antagonist of this type that she knew him to be such. After all, Jim's eagerness to secure his inheritance, and her own Mexican opportunity would be sufficient reasons for their hurried marriage, at least as plausible as a good many of the war marriages nowadays. No reason to put this man on guard against her immediately. So while she told the broad facts she omitted all portions of the explanation which had to do with Mark Caldwell himself.

When she had finished he said, "So he married you because he wanted to come into his money immediately. Isn't it a bit odd that he didn't come to me and ask for an advance of any amount he wanted?"

"Is it odd?" Sandra repeated innocently. "If you were legally bound by the clauses of the will, you could hardly have made him any large advance without violating your trust, could you?"

Mark threw her a swift doubtful look but made no more comment on that score. "I presume you brought your marriage certificate with you."

"Here it is."

For a moment there was only the sound of the parchment rustling in the man's brown hands. Then he looked up. It was a direct, mildly astonished look. "If I'm not mistaken, you must be the granddaughter of Edward Copley Marshall. A great man, one of the foremost scientists of his day."

"Yes, my grandfather."

He pushed the parchment across the desk to her and stood up.

"Well, Mrs. Demarest, we may as well be frank with each other. Of course you'll assume, and rightly, that I must have the record of this marriage checked. But according to you it was solely a contract of convenience, by which your husband hoped to profit and by which you have already profited considerably. And now you are free without the necessity of divorce action. It was no real marriage?"

"No," inaudibly.

"According to my sister's will, Jim's sister would have inherited from him automatically if he died unmarried. Things are a bit changed now. Do I understand that you intend to claim a widow's rights?"

"I shall claim the rights left me in his will." Sandra said slowly.

"He left no will."

"I don't know where the original is, but I have a copy." She drew it from her hand-bag and watched him study it. His face was expressionless. "You see it doesn't change things much, after all, does it? In spite of Jim's marriage, his sister

gets the bulk of his money. The only difference is," she gazed blandly out the window, "I am executrix until Julia is eighteen. Then she'll have it with no strings attached, unlike her own fortune."

For the first time his courteous veneer cracked and he exclaimed almost explosively, "But this is only a copy! No signatures!"

Sandra was plaintive. "I do hope we find the original. Otherwise I'll have to claim entire rights, and then go through the boresome business of turning most of it over to Julia when she's eighteen. The important thing is to follow out the spirit of Jim's will, isn't it? And fortunately we can do that legally, whether his original will turns up or not."

He said abruptly, "Suppose we leave the inheritance question for another time. The funeral is tomorrow. You'll stay over for that, of course?"

Sandra simulated astonishment. "But I have nowhere else to stay." It was true enough, she thought defensively, at least of New England, for she had rented the Cambridge house. How could she hope to get at the real state of affairs unless she could stay here, at least a few days? She must talk to Jim's sister. Perhaps after all, Jim had been wrong. As little as she had known him, she had seen that Jim was high-strung, sensitive to a fault, in spite of his charm and very real generosity. Two men could hardly be as temperamentally opposed as this uncle and nephew.

"This estate is not your husband's," Mark Caldwell said a trifle dryly, "but please allow me to be your host until Jim's affairs can be straightened out. You'd probably like to go to your room now for dinner's to be served rather early tonight." For a moment his face softened from its impersonality and

was almost kind. "Tomorrow won't be too difficult for you. No one's to be at the services except the family, and the family lawyer."

In spite of herself, or perhaps because she was feeling the reaction from the tension of the last half hour, Sandra found that new tone of his comforting. "I'd like to see Jim before I go to my room," she said in a very low voice. Mark Caldwell nodded and crossing the room drew back the folding doors at the far end. When she had passed through them he closed them behind her. She had been left alone.

For a moment she hesitated, then walked steadily forward. The room was very cold, and the banks of heavily scented flowers stirred drowsily at her steps and pushed forward pungent odors that made her pulse beat slow and poundingly. Shaded lights were above the great silver coffin. She felt a strange expectancy, as though by the very act of willing it, this alien room would melt away and she would find herself crossing Harvard Square on a fall evening. There would be no Jim Demarest, no Mark Caldwell, no silver coffin. There would just be Sandra Marshall and her grandfather.

She bent over the coffin.

He was pale and very still, but if the compressed lips had lost their restless curves, the thick wave of silver-blond hair and the flaxen eyelashes were incongruously alive under the lights. She had turned toward the folding doors again when she heard the Senator's voice in the room beyond, muffled but distinguishable.

"I tell you I have to go back tonight, now. There was a wire waiting for me at the station." The station? Sandra thought. No, not the Reed's Crossing station which had been firmly locked.

Then Mark Caldwell's voice. "I believe you planned it. You're simply walking out on me and leaving me to pull your chestnuts out of the fire. Don't forget you're in this as deep as I am."

"That attitude is quite—ahem—uncalled for."

"You're not addressing the Senate. See here, Charles, how'll it look if you're not at the services tomorrow?" Suddenly his voice dropped, as though he were just remembering Sandra's presence in the next room. I believe I have all the makings of an accomplished eavesdropper, Sandra thought to herself grimly as she pushed the doors apart and entered the library.

"I'll go to my room now if I may," she said to Mark Caldwell.

The Senator barely inclined his head as she passed, and she could see that he was pale and shaken. There was something more than grief in his face. There was fear, abject fear.

2

SANDRA'S ROOM WAS SOMBER at this hour though its polished highboy and the canopied bed, older far than the mid-Victorian house, held their own beauty. Kneeling on one of the deep window ledges she tried to see through the pall of dusk which had already fallen, but only a thick line of forest was visible, melting into a sky almost as dark.

In a subdued mood she dressed for dinner, pausing often to warm her chilly hands at the low open fire. Rationed heat didn't penetrate these high vaulted rooms to any comfortable extent. She was conscious of a great lassitude, almost an indifference, as though the graph line of her courage had dropped suddenly in the last few minutes. She slipped into the black crepe, gave the bronze hair one last gleam with the brush and opened her door.

The corridor was long and wide and deserted and her heels clicked loudly on the parquetted floor. It was a relief when the thick stair-carpetting drank up that sound. The room where Mark Caldwell was waiting was of small dimensions, really the breakfast room she noted, catching sight of gaily painted chairs and still another open fire. He turned at her entrance and smiled.

"The family's so small now that Julie and I choose to eat here generally," he commented. "A bit more cheerful than the state dining-hall. A month from now these big rooms will be at their best." Sandra agreed politely, but inwardly she

thought that nothing on earth could make this great vaulted ark of a house ever seem home-like to her.

"I haven't kept you waiting?"

"No." Mark's mouth had an amused quirk as there was the sound of quick heels storming across the hall. "I rather think this is Julie now." A small, flaxen-haired cyclone burst into the room, spun by Sandra unseeingly and braked in front of Mark. An imperious hand thrust a letter under his chin.

"Do you see this letter, Uncle Mark? It's my letter! Mine, do you hear me? And you opened it! That's a federal offense and I could have you arrested!"

Mark grasped her shoulders lightly and swung her about to face Sandra. "We're not alone, Julie. This is your sister-in-law, Sandra Demarest."

"My sister-in-law!"

"Jim's widow."

"But I didn't know he was married!" She hardly seemed to acknowledge Sandra's murmur as she went on, swinging her former emotion into a new channel as easily as a child does. "Neither did you, Mark! You can't tell me you did."

"I'm glad to know you, Julie." Sandra finally made herself heard. "May I call you that?"

"Of course. I'm stunned, I'm speechless! You're not a bit Jim's type. I don't mean you're not awfully attractive. It must have been a secret marriage!"

"Not as far as my family were concerned," Sandra said a little tartly, but Julie wasn't listening.

"It's stupendous. Boy, what will Amy Daniels say! When she threw Jim over, I suppose she thought he'd sit around and sob for a couple of years. Serves her right! Welcome to the family, Sandra. You're going to live here, of course?"

Mark got a word in there. "Calm down, little one. Mrs. Demarest has had a rather trying day. And dinner's waiting."

Julie flounced into a chair and pressed the buzzer as he seated Sandra. "Now look here, you're not going to get rid of me like that. May I ask what right you have to read Ronald Manning's letter to me?"

"I wouldn't be bothered to read it." The two of them seemed able to ignore Becket's entrance with the soup. "I simply wanted the young puppy's address."

"Why, may I ask?"

"To tell him you're not in the field for proposals for a few years."

Julie spooned her soup furiously. "I suppose you expect me to spend my life stuck in this rotten old village, miles away from everything!"

"Not at all. How's for Mexico, one of these days?" He shot a look at Sandra. "Your sister-in-law can give us all the tips on where to go. I'm afraid my only experience there has been painfully tourist. By the way," he added deliberately, "may I call you Sandra? It's a bit more natural under the circumstances." As Sandra nodded rather stiffly, he grinned. "Julie calls me Uncle Mark only when she's annoyed with me, which is nine-tenths of the time. I hope you won't punish me that way."

"Would I have any occasion to punish you?" she asked coolly.

"You might." Their eyes held each other for a second, then Julie broke in again.

"It seems dreadful that none of Jim's friends are going to be here tomorrow." Her tone was still mutinous.

"They're all at such a distance, and with the car situation

as it is. . . ." Mark murmured, then added more hardily, "You don't want to have the house over-run with curious outsiders, do you?"

"It would be a relief to see a few, even at a funeral," Julie muttered. Realizing the gracelessness of her remark she flushed hotly and subsided. The meal progressed smoothly enough after that until coffee was served. Then Julie jumped up. "Let's take it upstairs and have a gab-fest, Sandra," she suggested. "Mark always likes the laboratory after dinner anyway. By himself."

Mark said mildly, "I thought maybe you two would join me tonight." But Julie shook her head.

"No. I never had a sister before and we can't get acquainted with you around." On the stairs she said in a stage whisper, "Let's go to your room, do you mind? I'm so crazy to hear about everything but we'd never get rid of Marta. She's my old nurse and the housekeeper now, horribly hard to snub and running in and out of my room all the time."

Half between amusement and embarrassment, Sandra found herself marshalled rather than conducted to her room. Once there, Julie snapped the lock and plumped herself on the floor beside the fire, motioning Sandra to do the same. "Before you say a word, I want to tell you how sorry I am for you and yet how nice it is to find a sister. I thought you were stunning the minute I saw you. Interesting, too. Cigarette? Were you terribly in love with Jim? I always thought he was still keen about Amy."

Sandra was glad to let Julie chatter on, glad to be able to collect her thoughts and screen her own expression behind the thin gossamer of smoke. How much should she tell Julie? She studied the other shrewdly and decided on most of the

truth. Julie's volatile, childish manner was evidently habitual, and yet somewhere behind those china-blue eyes, Sandra thought she could see a tired, unhappy look. Young as Julie was she might be a girl difficult to deceive. Sandra drew a long breath and as prosaically as she could retold her story as she had told it to Mark. If Julie asked for more Sandra would tell it. When Sandra's voice ceased Julie laid a hand on her knee.

"Have you told me everything? You haven't said how Mark took the news." Her words dropped slyly on the room. "I'll bet he wasn't too happy."

"Why should he be, having an unknown widow suddenly turn up?"

Julie shook her head. "That wasn't it. Tell me, did Jim ever say anything about Mark to you?"

Sandra hedged. "How do you mean?"

Julie looked around, a quick nervous glance seeking every shadow in the room. "Perhaps I shouldn't say anything, but after all, you're Jim's widow, aren't you? The last time he was here, months ago, he was awfully bitter against Mark. He'd just announced his engagement and he told me Mark was against it. Then the engagement was broken off. I never heard anything definite but I've often wondered if Mark did it."

"Why should he have broken Jim's engagement? How could he?"

Julie's voice dropped lower.

"I don't know how he could, but I could guess why he'd want to. There's the money, you know. He's doing some frightfully important work for the government."

"Then the government is probably staking him." Sandra tried to sound impartial.

Julie said dryly, "Government money isn't generally shelled out until an invention is completed and proved, is it? Until then, inventions have to be financed privately. Maybe Mark wanted to hang on to Jim's capital until he could be sure his invention would be profitable. Maybe he's even spent some of that capital," her words were deliberate, "and has to stall things until he can replace it."

"Such frauds aren't done as easily as you think. You're simply guessing."

Julie's eyes flamed. "I have a pretty good reason to suppose I'm right." Sandra lowered her head to conceal the excitement in her own eyes. Was she to find some hint of the truth within so few hours of her arrival? "I'm seventeen now, old enough to have some friends of my own age." Julie went on tempestuously. "All my life I've been brought up with governesses. Oh, Mark was always good to me," she went on grudgingly, "he's taken me abroad three times, but always chaperoned within an inch of my life. I'm supposed to go to college this fall, but I'm willing to bet it won't happen. For the last few weeks whenever I've mentioned it, Mark has been vague as the dickens. My application isn't even in."

Sandra's excitement flattened ludicrously. "But Julie, all that isn't so terrible. It's what most poor little rich girls have to stand."

"Well, there's something else. Mark took me to a dance a while ago—quite a departure for him—and I met a man there."

"Ah!"

"He's very attractive," Julie said defiantly, "and we're keen

about each other. He's not a kid that doesn't know his own mind. He's twenty-two. He came to call on me twice and then Mark said I couldn't see him any more, that I was too young to be interested in men. That isn't true. Look at me." Sandra looked and had to acknowledge that while Julie was too young for a serious affair, she was certainly ripe for the companionship of the male of the species.

"Your uncle's a little old-fashioned," she admitted. Julie was scornful.

"Old-fashioned! He's only thirty-six himself and he's traveled a lot while I was shut up here with a bunch of stuffy governesses. I'm not asking to get married, though goodness knows I may have to elope to get out from under. You know what I think? I think Mark doesn't want to give me any chance to get interested in any man! He wants to use my money as well as Jim's!"

"You're making him out a monster, Julie," Sandra said quietly though her heart was beating at a rapid rate. This was suggestion with a vengeance. Julie paled, as though she realized how complete her accusation had been.

"Oh, he's been kind to me," she said reluctantly. "It's just since I've been growing up that he's been getting so suspicious and unreasonable. Even men who aren't monsters can be blind and cruel when it comes to their own interests." Sandra had a swift memory of her grandmother slaving over a coal stove so that Doctor Edward Copley Marshall's private laboratory might have the latest in delicate equipment. But Jim had hinted at more than a suggestion of financial fraud, and downstairs his body seemed to bear him mute witness.

"Was Jim ill long?" she asked. It seemed that she was

changing the subject and Julie flushed at what she thought was the implied rebuke.

"Only three days," she answered a little sullenly. Then tears flooded her eyes. "I wanted to see him so badly and I never did until he was gone. He came late one night and I was sure I heard his voice in the library. But when I went down, Mark said Jim had gone to bed ill. He was worse next day and I couldn't see him."

"I suppose they had a great many specialists."

"I don't really know. They put him in the laboratory that night and I wasn't allowed to go near."

Sandra was casual. "Will you show me that wing tomorrow? I'd like to see where he was when he was living."

Julia's eyes were round and shocked. "Oh I couldn't! I was never allowed in the laboratory suite even when I was little. They opened it up for Jim because it's away from the noise of the house. But no one goes in there ordinarily except Mark—and Becket, of course, to clean up. He's really the butler now, but he's been with Uncle years and he takes care of those rooms himself. I suppose it makes him feel superior to the other servants. But I can show you Jim's own rooms, the ones he always used. Would you like to see them now?"

"Tomorrow, please. I'm fearfully tired," Sandra admitted apologetically. She reached for her enamelled cold cream jar and loosened the silver lid in a tentative hint.

Julie was rueful. "Of course you are." But she didn't leave at once. Instead, she idly picked up the jar lid. "What a lovely bit of work! Florentine?"

Sandra nodded. "It was my mother's, one of the few things I have of hers."

"Remind me to order some cream. I've been out for nearly a week."

Sandra laughed and pushed the jar toward her. "You don't look as though you'd reached the cold cream age, but help yourself any time you want."

"Thanks." Julie scooped a generous daub from the jar and plastered it on one cheek for further reference. With a quite engaging unselfconsciousness about the comical effect this produced, she went on: "If you don't mind, I may borrow for a few nights. Well, breakfast at nine, unless you want a tray. The bell's by your bed." She paused at the door. "I think I'm going to like having a sister."

"Same here, Julie."

Sandra undressed slowly and tumbled into the great four-poster, sleepy and warm from her bath. Yet within half an hour she found herself wide awake with the dreadful wide-awakeness that comes when one has expected sleep, but when the mind is too turbulent to give in to it. With eyes staring into the darkness she went over and over the events of the day, trying to sort them into their respective places. And above and beyond every thought was the memory of that still figure downstairs.

Had anyone ever really cared desperately for Jim? Somehow she found a sadness in Julie's readiness to forget him in a discussion of her own interests. But she was too young to have seen much of him. And her sheltered life could have given her no intimacy with grief or death. She was young, passionately and egotistically young. And very lovable.

There were Jim's uncles, of course. But one of them was too absorbed in his political life to spare even time for the funeral service. Beyond that, there had been something

frightened, almost spineless, in his determination to leave. And Mark? The Sphinx had posed her a riddle and she didn't know the answer. She knew at least this: that Mark Caldwell's sorrow was wholly conventional, if it existed at all. And as for herself, she hadn't known Jim long enough to have liked or disliked him. She sighed a little and was drifting off to sleep again when a strange question popped unbidden into her mind. Had Jim died of pneumonia?

With an impulse she couldn't afterwards explain to herself, she jumped from bed and switching on the night-light, slipped into a negligée and thrust her slender feet into small satin mules. It was after midnight, she noted swiftly. She'd go down and sit with Jim, sit with him until dawn. It was his last night and someone, even a very selfish, egotistical someone like herself, could wait it out with him.

The great hall below was dimly lighted, a fact for which she was thankful as her fingers stole down the balustrade of the stairs. Even though the whole household was very evidently abed, she disliked going through Mark's library. There must be an entrance from the hall into the room where the body rested. She found it quickly and opened the noiseless door. The shaded lights were still burning in the room, but at the dank cold that met her, she was sorry she hadn't worn something more protecting than the silk negligée. But she forgot the chill when she approached the coffin. For a long time she stood there. How often she had heard a body described as wax-like, and how true it was. Almost against her will, her hand moved out, pulled back the silk net which lay over the coffin. With that obscuring softness gone, every line in the face looked sculptured. Even the heavy lashes seemed fastened there by skilful fingers.

She bent closer. That scar above his eyebrow—it seemed more livid than in life. How could that be? Closer and closer she leaned, then on a quick indrawn breath, stretched out her hand, touched boldly the cheek, the lashes, the firm chin. There was a chair nearby and she sank into it before her knees should buckle under her. Was she dreaming? Was she insane from the anxiety and excitement of the day? If it was neither, then the body that lay there tricked out in the panoply of death was no body. It was an image in wax.

She pinched her arm viciously until it reddened. Then she rose unsteadily from the chair and looked again. It was true. A delirious relief and wonder filled her. Almost immediately that relief was washed away by the first real terror she had ever known. This mockery didn't necessarily mean that Jim was alive somewhere. It might only mean that he had died an unnatural death. She looked wildly around. The still room, the late hour, the heavy banks of flowers were suddenly horrible; all this flowered sweetness and peace, a trap.

Shaking with cold and shock she flung the net back over the coffin. Then with trembling fingers she opened the door, and closing it behind her, fled up the stairs to the warm safety of her own room.

3

DURING THE BRIEF FUNERAL SERVICE the next afternoon she sat with bowed head and expressionless face. Her mind was working swiftly enough, yet to no purpose. Only six days ago Jim had come to Willow Miles, at least according to Julie. What had he been doing in the intervening months? Had he perhaps been here longer than six days? Was it possible for the image to have been made in that time or had Mark had it made long before, and then waited, like a spider in its web, for Jim to walk into this trap? No, that seemed hardly credible, for the artistry of the waxen fraud indicated that it had been modelled from a careful study of Jim, alive or dead. But would Jim alive ever have stood for this reproduction? No. Then the copy must have been made from a death mask. But if his face had been unmutilated, then why couldn't his own body have lain in the coffin?

Wax. Where had she heard that word before in connection with death? Not Madame Tussaud's Museum, that wasn't it. Then she remembered, remembered a four-year-old Sandra who had tiptoed into a forbidden room to look at a long strange box, and who had squealed delightedly, "Mummy, look! Aunt Mary's face is just like my doll!" And her mother had pulled the little hand away and said hurriedly, "Yes, darling, but you must run upstairs now."

Sandra sat in a sort of horrified despair. Had the nervous strain of the night before and a sort of subconscious memory made her leap to an utterly wrong conclusion? A gruesome

conclusion? People did have hallucinations when they were tired and high-strung. Their sense of touch as well as their eyes could betray them. Aunt Mary's face had been as cold and smooth as wax too. . . .

Her head whirled with contradictory suppositions and she barely heard the low words of the officiating clergyman, "In the midst of life, we are in death—" And didn't one always have to have a death certificate? How could Mark have got around that?

The small group was disintegrating. Now was the time to step forward and be sure. Now, before the lid of the coffin was closed inexorably. Come on, Sandra, if you're convinced, walk right up there. Walk up and demand to touch that face if you're so sure. Or couldn't you pretend you wanted to kiss Jim a last time? No, that would be beastly. Mark knew there had been no real marriage. You coudn't take that cold, ironic stare of his. Who was it said, "Sometimes it's easier to die than to make a scene"? True enough.

It was like swimming in the lethargic grip of a nightmare to watch that lid close. It was too late now. Too late. She was conscious that Julie had gently touched her arm, and then that they were entering a limousine.

As they came up the steps on their return from the private vault on the estate, Mark spoke to them in a low tone. "Sandra, would you and Julie come into the other room and speak to Mr. Davenport? He's the lawyer who's handled the legal end of Jim's affairs." But at the door of the drawing-room, he allowed Julie to step ahead of them and laid a detaining hand on Sandra's arm. "I've told Davenport about you," he murmured, "and he's anxious to know if you've said anything to Julie about the will business." Sandra shook her

head and Mark looked relieved. "Good. Everything's so uncertain that there's no use stirring her up about things. Davenport knows of several Boston banks where Jim may have kept a private box beside the one we knew about. But it will take a bit of doing and a good deal of red tape."

He pushed open the door again and they entered the drawing-room. It had been completely rearranged and aired of the cloying scent of funeral flowers, and on the great hearth at one end of the room huge logs were crackling cheerfully. Now that the chairs and heavy divans had been replaced, and the latest periodicals and papers lay in homely confusion on several tables, the room had an appearance of quiet comfort that was lacking in most of the house.

Mr. Davenport had not gone to the cemetery. He stood now teetering on his heels in front of the fire, a short fat man with sparse white hair and extraordinarily shrewd little eyes. Hovering modestly in a corner, his secretary held her employer's brief case. As he came forward to meet Sandra, the lawyer gave her one quick glance, then looked away, even as he spoke.

"A granddaughter of Dr. Marshall. H'm, very nice, very nice, indeed. Please accept my sincere sympathy for your unfortunate loss." The words were as casual as though he had offered her a box of candy, and Sandra rightly guessed that he expected no reply. "Let's see, we have Mrs. Demarest's Cambridge address, haven't we, Miss Knox? And any other data we need?" A pale smile from the mousey Miss Knox apparently answered him. Now his eyes came back to Sandra and fastened there. "You're staying on here?"

"For a day or two."

Mr. Davenport frowned at Mark. "Only a day or two?

Really, I can hardly accomplish anything very satisfactory in anything under two weeks. Even a negative report."

Sandra said quietly, "The Cambridge house is rented now, but I'll send you my Boston address as soon as I know what it is."

"But then you haven't any plans actually, have you, Sandra? At least right now?" For the first time Julie showed some interest in the conversation. "Why can't you stay on longer?"

Mark said almost reluctantly, "Yes, why not? At least for a couple of weeks. Perhaps by then Davenport's office will have some information for us."

"If I don't have that information," the lawyer said sharply, "the four of us will have to have a session to thrash some things out."

Julie slipped a hand through his arm. "Davvy, don't you try to do Sandra out of Jim's money." Her voice was jocular and he patted her hand.

"Couldn't if I wanted to, little one, because your uncle Mark is the financial brain. I'm just the legal beast of burden." His smile faded as he spoke again to Sandra. "Then you'll be here, Mrs. Demarest, when I come back in about two weeks?"

Sandra nodded, and a few minutes later, after some very perfunctory conversation, Davenport left. Sandra thought with acrid amusement, that's the only reason we had to meet. Mark wants me to stay on longer and he had to use Mr. Davenport to manage it. And Julie. But he put on a good show of not giving a hoot himself. But why does he want me to stay? Is he getting suspicious that I'm suspicious? She felt a little chill, as though some reverberation reached her from those moments in this very room the night before. She glanced

at Mark who had settled himself comfortably with his pipe after Davenport's departure. He didn't look so very terrifying here in the sunlight, she admitted, just a brown young man who liked to dabble in chemistry and who enjoyed being a bit overbearing and dogmatic at times.

Julie flung a magazine down impatiently. "Do you ride, Sandra? Mark, do you think it would be awful if we just took a canter around our own bridle paths? No one would see us and Jim wouldn't mind. I feel as though I'd scream unless I got out of the house for a while. Please," she coaxed.

"Do you ride, Sandra?"

"A little."

"Well, if Julie can find a habit for you I don't see any reason why the two of you shouldn't go out." He sighed a little. "Wish I could join you." Julie sprang up as though she were afraid he might be tempted further.

"Come on, Sandra. We're both tall and thin and one of my habits is bound to fit you. I'll run along and tell Marta to get them out." She vanished, but Mark, who had risen, halted Sandra.

"No doubt you'll be going into town occasionally the next couple of weeks. You won't mind if I ask—please don't take Julie with you."

Sandra smiled uncertainly. "I'm an excellent chaperon."

There was no answering smile. "Perhaps. But a bit impulsive, aren't you? Julie's been seeing a good deal of a certain chap lately, and I don't like it. I've given him a strong hint to that effect." At Sandra's frown he went on. "You'll have to let me use my own judgment as far as Julie is concerned. And you'll make things a good deal pleasanter for all of us if you keep that in mind. Manning's visits here have

stopped, and I don't want Julie to make a cat's-paw of you by meeting him other places."

Sandra's chin went up. "Aren't you making a mistake, treating a seventeen-year-old girl like a child? I don't know anything about this man you speak of, but how can she develop any discrimination if she never sees any youngsters her own age? In a generation like this, you can't keep her cloistered much longer."

He struck the dottle from his pipe abruptly and noisily, as though that small violence were a relief. "Discrimination?" His lip curled. "If Julie exercises as much discrimination about men as you did, Sandra, she might not find that it resulted so profitably."

"I rather asked for that one, didn't I?" And Sandra turned and walked out of the room.

A little while later she and Julie were cantering toward the forest bridle paths. Julie looked back toward the stables and laughed softly.

"I was afraid Mark would tell Roberts to come with us, but I guess he thinks the two of us can't get into much mischief."

In a few minutes they were actually in the woods. It was one of those spring days when the dampness that fills a house with chill, seems to have absorbed an earthy warmth out of doors. Through the brown underbrush there was the occasional gleam of arbutus, and the trees already held a feathery pale green. Sandra felt her spirits rise. She had been content to jog along until she got the feel of the young mare she was riding, but now she touched it lightly with the bamboo crop. Julie followed her lead, but more sure of her mount cantered past Sandra and disappeared around a curve of the path. And that suited Sandra too. She reined up the mare and sat

there a few minutes, quietly content to taste the spring and the silence. When at last she moved on around the curve of the path she found Julie waiting. But Julie was tasting something even more heady than the spring, judging by her flushed cheeks and eager eyes. She put a hand on Sandra's knee when the two mounts drew abreast.

"Be a good sport, Sandra," she pleaded. "Ronny promised to be here at this time every day this week until I could get away. You know, Ronald Manning. I told you about him. Please, you'll be right here."

"Good grief!" Sandra was disconcerted. "You're putting me in a terribly awkward position. Your uncle . . ."

"Phooey on Mark. He didn't ask you to chaperon me, did he?" He certainly hadn't, Sandra thought grimly. Far from it. "And what's more," Julie went on, seeing the indecision in Sandra's face, "you know perfectly well he's acting as though this were the Middle Ages instead of the twentieth century. Don't let him get around you, too," she begged.

"You're not planning to elope?" Sandra was half-smiling, half-serious. "And isn't this rather a queer time for you to—"

"You mean Jim's funeral today?" Julie was a little defiant now. "But we planned this before we knew Jim was going to die, and if I don't see Ronny soon I may not be able to get in touch with him for a long time again. Mark reads my letters sometimes, and for all I know he may hold them out on me. Oh, please, Sandra. Jim wouldn't care. He'd be glad for me to be happy, now it's too late for him."

She paused and finally Sandra shrugged. "Okay. I won't say anything this time, but don't drag me into any part of it again."

Julie laughed impishly, as though the pall of the day had

lifted for her completely. Then she whistled. There was an answering whistle in the distance and a few moments later, a man rode into the little clearing. Sandra studied him curiously. He was attractive all right, with his slight, well-knit figure and alert, engaging face. But he didn't look even his twenty-two years. Perhaps later on the mouth wouldn't seem so weak and unformed. And she didn't care for the way in which he constantly addressed her, after the introduction, as though Julie's interest was not sufficient.

"I'm *persona non grata,* you know," he said to her, after a few expressions of condolence to Julie. "Couldn't you say a good word for me to Mr. Caldwell?"

"I'm practically a stranger in the family." Sandra was unsmiling. "But as far as I know, Julie's uncle hasn't any objection to you personally. He simply thinks Julie is too young to be interested in any one man."

"Oh, come now!" His laugh was infectious. "She's more grown-up than most girls her age—"

"And I think," Sandra went on, "that it's stupid for a girl to meet any man this way. Why don't you have it out with Mr. Caldwell yourself?"

She liked his rueful flush better than his earlier air of sophistication. And his voice was forlorn. "I have, and he was very polite and decided. A frost." He leaned forward. "We're really engaged you know. Of course now that they're cancelling so many deferments, I'll probably be in the service in a few weeks. I hope so. But it seems rather hard lines that we can't see each other once in a while now." Julie broke in stormily.

"And we're going to, Ronny! Sandra needn't know anything about it if she's afraid of Mark!"

Sandra was bland. "Don't be a tragedy queen, Julie. I'm going to start back now, slowly, and I'll expect you to catch up with me in ten minutes." She nodded to Manning rather gravely and without a backward glance turned from the clearing into the homeward trail.

She felt chilled and tired again. Unwillingly she agreed with Julie's estimate of the situation, and as unwillingly found herself disappointed that the youngster hadn't a stronger shoulder on which to lean. Manning was obviously a gentleman, but he was just as obviously the type to be mysteriously lacking if any real crisis arose. No; no help there, with either of them. Julie was too young to be involved at present in the black mist of Sandra's suspicions, and Manning was too egotistical.

"You see I decided to join you after all," said a smooth voice. She looked up startled, and saw Mark Caldwell. He was on foot, and in spite of his size must have moved in an amazingly silent fashion. He was as brown as the bark of the tree he leaned against, and his narrow eyes reminded her involuntarily of some waiting creature of the forest.

"Julie's behind you?"

"Yes." She fidgeted nervously, wondering how many of the ten minutes had gone by. But he was serene enough.

"You sit the mare well; I saw you from the window. Air has brushed away a few of the cobwebs, hasn't it?" He eyed the dishevelled curls and the warm curve of her cheek, and Sandra found herself flushing under his steady look.

"It was good to get out," she admitted, and desperately willed Julie to come. But Caldwell only stroked the mare's nose meditatively.

"We're fortunate to have these woods to ourselves—you did

have them to yourselves? Sometimes there are trespassers. We deal a bit rudely with them, I'm afraid." His smile was pleasant but Sandra shivered. "You're cold. Ride along and I'll wait for Julie."

She shook her head and started to turn the mare's head. "No, I'm not cold. I'll ride back and see where she is." Mark caught at the bridle, apparently negligently, yet his hold was such that the mare halted obediently.

"Let her finish her visit," he said affably. "She is visiting, isn't she? I thought so," though Sandra hadn't uttered a word. Suddenly his expression changed. He laid one brown hand on her arm and his eyes met hers directly. It was like looking into molten steel. "My dear girl, if you're to be here another two weeks, we'll have to come to an understanding. I'm quite capable of locking Julie up on bread and water if you keep meddling. Oh, you probably didn't know what her plans were when you started out. Fortunately, I did. I was just curious to know whether you'd take the sensible course of telling me. But I'm afraid you're an incurable romantic."

"I haven't meddled," she said in a very low voice. It was maddening that in their first real tug-of-war he should be conventionally in the right.

"Oh, but you have. Only here two days, but you've encouraged Julie, at least by your silence. And it matters more to me than you can imagine to have her be straightforward in everything."

Sandra laughed aloud, angrily. "Straightforward? Do you think the atmosphere around her is conducive to being straightforward? You do choose to be mysterious, you know, whether it's about funeral arrangements or anything else!"

Mark's cheeks were stained a darker brown by the rush of

blood. "I have only one little mystery, I assure you. And that's my laboratory. A poor thing but mine own, as Shakespeare says—or does he?"

"I'm not the least bit interested in your laboratory," Sandra began, but he interrupted.

"No? Yet you asked Marta where it was. The only mysteries you'd find there are rather smelly ones unless you have a passion for chemistry yourself. Listen, Sandra, I don't want to quarrel with you. But please remember that Julie is seventeen, not twenty-two, that she isn't a wife, that she hasn't had any contact with life except through books." He hesitated, and for the first time she saw a look far back in his eyes that in another man she might have termed pleading. She almost weakened to that look, then suddenly remembered a room filled with flowers and a mockery.

"No contact with life," she repeated coldly. "That's just the difficulty." He stepped back and shrugged.

"Not your difficulty at any rate. Mine. Just as well if you didn't forget that fact."

Just then Julie cantered into sight, calling out in gay ignorance.

"Here I am on the dot, or almost. Sorry I was cross, Sandra. I was afraid you were going to be stuffy about Ronald . . ." Her voice faltered and died and every bit of color drained from her cheeks. "Mark! How—how long have you been here?"

He walked to her and reaching up lifted her from the saddle with what seemed little effort. Then he put both hands on her shoulders though his voice was calm enough. "Silly of you to have done this, Julie, after promising me. And I'm afraid Manning isn't going to like what I'll have to tell him.

If you can't be trusted, college will have to wait for another year or two." Julie flung herself away from him.

"You never intended to send me anyway—that's just an excuse!" she screamed. "I'll run away!"

"Steady there," he warned. But Julie's eyes were dilated and her voice cracked with humiliation and rage.

"Steady?" she repeated. "You've bossed me for the last time!" Her riding crop flashed in the air and struck cuttingly across the man's chest, flicking his chin. And again. For a second he was still with an ominous immobility, and Sandra held her breath as her eyes darted from one to the other. Then with one leap forward Mark had wrenched the whip from Julie's hand. His expression seemed not to have changed and to Sandra there was something almost more terrible in the very control this man had over his anger. But his voice was shaken in response to some deep shock.

"You've never done that before, Julie," as though he spoke to himself.

Julie was insolent under the sting of excitement.

"Not to you, old bean," she said, "but Marta's had a taste."

"You've struck Marta?" He stared at his niece and under that look she seemed to come back into reality unwillingly. Her tone was sullen enough, but normal.

"She deserved it. I won't have her spying on me."

Mark walked to a fallen log and sat down on it. "Come here, Julie, and sit down too," he said. "This is as good a place as any to have things out, if Sandra will excuse us." Sandra nodded and her heel touched the mare's side, but her eyes were on the riding crop in Mark's hand. As she rode by he stood and handed the crop to her. For the first time since

Julie had appeared there was a spark of amusement in his eyes.

"My drastic methods don't include corporal punishment, I promise you." And Sandra felt a bit of a fool as she rode down the trail carrying two crops. Just the same, at the next curve she glanced back. Julie was crying very thoroughly on Mark's shoulder. Sandra sighed as she rode on. Julie was so much more of a spoiled child than she had thought at first, and a weather-vane too, swayed by Mark or Manning or Sandra, herself. She thought abruptly, I don't blame her too much. It would be awfully easy to be influenced by Mark, if you hadn't been forewarned. Perhaps because he always acts so sure of himself, as though whatever he did sprang from some deep rightness. Hitler felt the same way and didn't keep his feelings from the world as Mark did.

Sandra rode unseeing now of the reddening maples. She had just two weeks to find out whether Jim's money had been fraudulently used, and whether Jim himself had been liquidated when he had discovered the fraud.

4

THE SHORT LOVELY SUNSET was almost gone as Sandra neared the house, or perhaps it was only that the bulk of the masonry, piled up against the western sky, screened it from her. She reined the mare to a halt on the edge of the courtyard. Seen from the side, as she now viewed it, the house appeared even more sprawling than from the front, for it was deeper than it was wide. Rows of windows looked at her from black impenetrable eyes, and even the few small iron balconies did little to break the monotony of the wall. At the back a wing she hadn't noticed before ran at right angles to the length of the house. Its inner wall, the one which faced on the courtyard, had neither window nor door.

This must be the laboratory wing, and Mark had obtained more protection from noise by placing windows only on the western side. Was it approachable from there? With a mere glance at Roberts who was waiting for her at the stable door, Sandra touched the mare again and ambled with apparent casualness toward the back of the wing. At the turn of the stable wall she halted again and looked over her shoulder toward the drive. As yet no one was in sight except the groom. She moved on more briskly, then came to a sudden astonished stop.

The land behind the stables was obviously filled in, for directly under the windows of the wing ran a canal that disappeared into a culvert under the stable land. Its depth, blackness and turbulence perhaps deserved a more dignified

name than canal, for the water looked still untamed. Whoever crossed it would have to do so by means of the narrow iron bridge that ran directly to a small door set in this western wall of the wing. The line of windows, great plate-glass affairs, obviously lighting the laboratory, were set high above the door, and not a single balcony or even gutter pipe broke the prisonlike expanse of the wall.

Sandra smiled wryly.

The wing was about as approachable as a moat-guarded castle, unless one had a key to the small door at the bridge. The last rays of the sunlight had set the windows burning, so that she blinked as she stared at them. Even as she looked the sunset reflection in the nearest window seemed to waver and break. The window was slowly raised and some one leaned out. Sandra hugged the side of the stable wall but she was far down and to the left of the watcher's vision. In this position she could see nothing but a black profile against the sunset. A man it was, stout and heavily bearded. She could only be certain of that.

The window closed again and the wall presented its former glittering, blank face. Who had it been? Window cleaner, laboratory technician? But Julie had named all the servants, the whole household; no mention of Mark having an assistant. And no cleaner would be at work here on the day of the funeral; he wouldn't be at work at all, except under Mark's eye. She moved back into the courtyard, lost in troubled reflection, and sighed with relief when she saw that Julie and Mark hadn't yet returned. She left the mare with Roberts and hurried up to her room. She had a feeling that some of her remarks hadn't been too discreet, there in the woods.

Perhaps her mask needed refurbishing. She grinned a little

wearily at her reflection in the mirror and murmured aloud, "Methinks yon Cassius hath a lean and hungry look. I suspect this is just the night to try out that new lipstick."

Whether it was the lipstick or a miraculous spell of April warmth Sandra never knew, but the fact was that the next week slid by serenely, even with a sort of contentment; as though it had been entirely lifted from the context of past and future and must be accepted for itself.

The hard courts were usable and Mark took the two girls on at tennis several times. One famous set they actually won, and he shook his head dolefully. "I always said a chap should stick to golf and swimming after thirty-five but I'm a year late practicing my preachments."

Julie was scandalized. "You aren't going to quit tennis by letting two women beat you! Never mind. Here's a thought, Sandra. We'll ask the Meredith girls over for a set or two. New family down the line. I've just been looking for an excuse to meet them."

"Skip it," Mark advised lightly. "It wouldn't be kind anyway, because I understand Janey Meredith has finally been put in purdah by her exasperated family."

"Why—" Julie began, but Mark's eyes were cold.

"Named as corespondent in a divorce suit, that's why," he snapped. "A bit precocious for an eighteen-year-old."

"It always interests me," Sandra observed innocently, "that what is gossip when a woman repeats it becomes a necessary bit of information if it's a male doing the talking."

Mark said, "Exactly. I'm not apologizing."

"That would indeed be the day," she murmured.

Julie swung her racket viciously at the empty air. "I don't see that it's anything so terrible, Mark. I mean, it may not

have been Janey Meredith's fault. People do get mixed up in divorces and things when they can't help it."

Mark's smile rested pleasantly on Sandra. "True enough. We shouldn't put such people in the same category with those practical souls who plan divorces even before they're married, who like their matrimony served à la Alice-in-Wonderland."

"I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about," Julie said crossly, but she refused to be diverted from her argument. "Anyway, you needn't turn so preachy all of a sudden. From what I've heard, you've done some stepping out in your time, too."

"Spare my blushes," Mark said complacently. "Who has been casting a smirch?"

"Well, Jim once said that you were a cagey bird but no anchorite," Julie accused him triumphantly. Then her sulky face cleared and she burst out laughing. "You know what, Sandra? When I was little I used to think that an anchorite was a sort of sailor. Anchor—anchorite. Perfectly good logic, isn't it? But wouldn't it surprise a sailor!"

They had to smile too, her gaiety was so infectious. "When I was little!" Julie didn't look a day over twelve right now, as she hopped on one foot, hugging her thin childish elbows and giggling. Her hair flew bright in the spring sun and her eyes were as blue and untroubled as a mountain lake. Sandra, following Mark's look, knew suddenly that he had loved the child Julie, that small girl who had once given him unquestioning affection, and who had never threatened his financial sovereignty. She could guess back to the years when he had still believed in his own integrity, because it was yet untried. That young merry look was in his eyes now as he smiled at

Julie and for a moment Sandra shared with them an atmosphere as crystalline and newly-minted as the April sun.

Julie eyed them both with a pleased smirk and her tone was almost affectionate as she coaxed Mark. "The day is still young. We ought to have another set. Come on, Mark. You know our beating you was just a fluke."

He shook his head and sprawled on the bench. "Never say I didn't let women have the last word, even in tennis," he said cheerfully. "And anyway, how can man die better than facing fearful odds, etcetera, etcetera?"

"I hate to admit it, but that last set was a fluke," Sandra confirmed Julie. "If you're good for another, I'm game."

"I'm not." He groaned and reached for his pipe. "I ache in every joint. Middle-age has set in. Go away, you two fiends, and let me just give in to it."

"Well, I must say," Julie was severe, "rather than cut out tennis, you might give up that four-mile private track meet you put on every morning before breakfast. Tennis is sociable and running simply isn't."

"Where do you run to?" Sandra asked idly, and then on an impulse added, "away from your thoughts?"

"Perhaps." His slate-gray eyes rested on her, expressionless. All the rest of the day Sandra kept wishing she hadn't said it. The trouble is, she thought that night as she was dealing out the gin rummy hand, that I ought to be glad I said it. It's the first time in a week that I've remembered what I'm here for. The trouble is that every day that goes by I'm more of a coward. No, not a coward, it's just that I keep wondering if I could have been right about the coffin. Maybe it was an hallucination, what with Jim having filled my mind with all sorts of wild ideas. Funny thing, but I actually know Mark now

much better than I ever knew Jim. That is, I don't exactly know Mark. . . .

"God, how stupid," Julie said from behind her shoulder, "you've thrown off the card you've been waiting for five rounds." Mark picked up the card with a flourish and then laid down his hand. Sandra laughed.

"Better take over, Julie," she advised, "I've been woolgathering until Mark's disgusted. He prefers to have me almost win, and then pounce on me."

"It's more fun that way," he agreed. Julie shook her head.

"No, you finish the game. I'm going to climb into my pyjamas and catch up on my radio listening. Haven't heard Frank for a coon's age." She drifted from the room.

Sandra did better under the spur of her disgrace, but now it seemed to be Mark's turn to be absentminded and to lose several rounds. When she had won the game and pushed back her chair, he made no motion to rise, but sat there, shuffling and re-shuffling the cards. "Sandra," he said suddenly, "what did you come here for?"

"What did I—? You know why."

He shook his head. "I thought I did, a week ago. Now I'm not so sure. It isn't in character with the rest of you, for you to have landed here as abruptly as you did, unheralded. Nor," he added deliberately, "for you to have agreed so promptly to staying on."

For a moment Sandra was tempted. In spite of the words themselves, his tone was so friendly it sounded like a genuine overture to her to be frank. When Mark's eyes held hers like that all her imaginings seemed twisted and sickly. Come on, he seemed to be saying, let's match confidences. Tell me what's troubling you. I can straighten it out. Sandra picked

up a cigarette and thought, as soon as it's lighted, I'll tell him. Now that he held the match flame for her his eyes were even nearer, more insistent.

Then Julie returned and perched on the arm of Sandra's chair. Her blond curls spilled over the shoulders of her Chinese lounging robe. "Before I park for the evening, Mark, just thought I'd tell you I hope I don't get the scare I got last night."

"What was that?" His voice was even but his expression was definitely annoyed at the interruption.

"Something woke me up. A sort of scuffling noise, and it seemed to come from just inside the door to the laboratory wing."

Mark was casual. "You mean actually inside the laboratory?"

"Yes. And then—I wouldn't swear to it, but it sounded as though somone cried out, just once."

He threw back his head and laughed. "One of your annual nightmares. There's not a soul in that wing now, and you know it."

Julie's tone was wise. "Maybe it was an Axis spy, trying to steal some of your scientific secrets."

"Afraid I'm not famous enough to warrant such attentions." His eyes twinkled. Sandra glanced from one to the other, her expression impassive. "Besides I'm a light sleeper and I'd have heard it myself." He smiled tolerantly as one smiles at a child who retains firm belief in an impossibility. "Describe the noise again."

"Well, first some feet kind of shuffled. It didn't sound like just one person. And there were little thudding sounds as

though people were wrestling and hitting the door once in a while. And breathing noises."

"You couldn't hear all that from your room," Mark said sharply and now the smile was wiped from his face. Julie flushed.

"No," she said slowly. "It—the whole thing scared me and yet made me a little curious. I sneaked out into the hall and listened near the door."

"A safe thing to do if there were burglars." He was curt.

"Then I heard what sounded like a low cry or exclamation or something. Not a scream."

Sandra couldn't conceal her interest any longer. "Did you hear anyone say anything?" Julie shook her head.

"No. The door is padded with baize, almost soundproof."

Mark screened himself behind a cloud of pipe smoke. "And after the exclamation, what?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all. Not a single sound for a long while, so I went back to bed and to sleep again." But Julie had created her sensation now and she was satisfied. Her uncle's annoyed face brought a gleam of malice to her eyes. Sandra felt the pulse in her wrists pounding. Thank heaven that Julie had come in when she had. What if she had been even a few minutes later? There was no candor in Mark's eyes now. They were veiled, opaque.

"Isn't that weird. What do you suppose it was, Mark?" Her tone, she thought, showed just the polite measure of desultory interest.

"I'll tell you exactly what I think it was, but Julie won't like my explanation." His regained composure even had a touch of amusement in it. "I think she had a nightmare, one which may have been with her while she walked, still sleeping,

into the hall. Or perhaps she simply dreamed that she got up and went into the hall. If she had actually heard those sounds, wouldn't she have roused someone? She knew I was alone in the wing, or supposed to be, and she would have been frightened into some sort of action. Instead, she goes back to bed immediately, into a sound sleep, just as one does after awaking briefly from a nightmare."

Julie scowled. "It didn't seem like a dream. Why on earth would I dream anything like that?"

His smile deepened. "When you were little you were madly curious about the laboratory. At first I used to let you watch me when I was doing post-graduate work, but you were bound to investigate the most delicate apparatus, so I finally had to refuse to let you in the laboratory at all. You were quite stormy about it, and once I caught Marta telling you a bogey story about what would happen to you if you went to the wing. I crowned her for that, of course, but I'm afraid it made an impression on you. The lab became an exciting and horrible mystery to you. It was about that time the baize door was put in. Your four-year-old screams didn't help the progress of my doctor's thesis."

Neither Julie nor Sandra made any comment and he went on lightly. "You've been through a trying time lately, and it's natural enough if you've taken to dreaming four-year-old dreams again. However, let's just suppose you heard something that actually happened. I'll call Becket." He rose and pulled the old-fashioned bell rope.

A moment later Becket entered and stood there quietly. Sandra always found him something of an enigma. Though he was obviously an American negro, his sad dark eyes, his poised immobility, suggested to her the East Indian. Nor did

he speak with any accent, though his voice was rich and flowed as smoothly as dark honey.

"Becket, Miss Julie has an idea that she heard a wrestling match take place last night just inside the laboratory door, the baize door. About what time, Julie?"

"I—I haven't the least idea," Julie faltered. Mark smiled again.

"Well, sometime after the household was asleep anyway. Do you know anything about it, Becket?" The servant looked back at him steadily.

"No, sir, I didn't hear a thing. Of course my room is on the third floor, sir."

"Your laboratory key is still on your chain, I suppose? No one could have taken it?"

"No, sir. I'm sure of that."

"And the key to the bridge?"

"You're the only one with a key to that, sir."

"Thanks. That's all, Becket." As the man noiselessly left the room Mark turned to the girls.

"Well, there you are. No one could have gotten in from outside the wing. I was sleeping there, at a distance from the door, of course, but still no one bothered me. I've been in the lab a good part of the morning and there weren't any signs of any intruders."

Julie stood up. "I don't know," she said uncertainly, "maybe I was dreaming after all. Well, good-night again."

"I'm going to turn in, too," Sandra said swiftly.

"So early?" he asked and she nodded without looking at him. One narrow escape was enough. He dropped a hand on Julie's shoulder as he rose. "Don't worry your little head. The next time you think you hear an odd noise, follow the

immemorial custom of your sex, stick your head under the bedclothes!" When they left he was still standing there, that thin, impervious smile fixed on his lips again. But that smile is a lot less dangerous than his friendly one, Sandra thought grimly. He would have caught me with that disarming look of his except that heaven protects women and idiots, and in my case the two were nearly synonymous a moment ago! Well, she reflected, Julie had saved her just in time. And Mark was furious, perfectly furious about it. That was some satisfaction.

Upstairs, Julie said helplessly, "He's clever, isn't he?"

Sandra was casual. "He's convinced you?"

"Almost." She was a little shamefaced as she went on, "I did use to have nightmares and I did use to walk in my sleep. What with all the upset of the last two weeks, maybe I was just stirred up enough. Come on into my room for a little while." Sandra agreed rather reluctantly. Her bed was more attractive at the moment than more chatter about Ronald Manning. But she suppressed a yawn and followed Julie down the hall.

"Where does that door just around the corner lead?" she asked, though she had made quite sure what it was, through a casual question to the housekeeper. That question hadn't sounded so casual to Marta, after all, she realized, for it had been reported to Mark.

"That? It's the door to the lab. You see it's quite near my rooms." Sandra sauntered toward the door and stood studying it. She even put out a hand and touched the baize that padded its solidity inside and out.

"Come on." There was a note of anxiety in Julie's voice.

"Julie, I do believe that Mark's right, and that this door still opens on your childhood bogey!" Sandra's laugh was gay.

Julie didn't answer, just swung wide the door to her own suite.

Sandra always found it charming. Here was none of the somberness of her own austere room. From the living-room, bright with glazed chintz, one could see the smaller dressing-room with its exquisite appointments, and beyond that the bedroom and bath. The whole place was as modern and insouciant as a Vogue cover, from the pastel tiles of the sunken bath to the built-in wardrobes splashed with bold futuristic designs.

"Did you plan the suite yourself?"

"Mark did." Julie's tone was indifferent. "It was done just before we came home from abroad two years ago. It's attractive, but what's the use? I never have any girls visiting me to see it." There was a sneer in her voice. Sandra curled up in a deep chair. It was certainly no part of her plan to soothe Julie's irascibility about Mark, yet perhaps it wasn't quite the time to encourage any more open rebellion. For the next hour she sat in sympathetic silence while Julie expatiated on Ronny's charms, Ronny's abilities, Ronny's prospects. But finally the subject seemed even to Julie superficially exhausted. "I've talked you deaf, dumb and blind," she admitted sheepishly.

Sandra denied it hastily as she rose. "Just the same, perhaps I'd better turn in. Haven't played so much tennis in years as I have this week and my bedtime seems to come earlier and earlier. No more nightmares," she cautioned, and smiled as she said good-night and closed the door behind her. But once in her room she didn't undress. She kicked off her high-heeled slippers and settled into the chaise longue with a magazine. Satisfied that she looked sufficiently languid, she pushed the

service button. When Angela appeared a few minutes later she asked, "Is it too late for me to have some hot chocolate, Angela?"

Angela was shocked. "Oh, no, Mrs. Demarest! I hope you haven't been going without every night because you didn't like to ask. Miss Julie always has her hot milk and Mr. Caldwell his sandwiches and scotch in the late evening. No trouble at all."

Sandra smiled her friendly, unhurried smile. "It must be some trouble when Mr. Caldwell is in the laboratory and can't hear you thumping on the door," she suggested.

"No, ma'am." Angela smiled too in response to Sandra's chattiness. "Becket fixes his trays and they go up the dumbwaiter to the laboratory."

"Oh, of course. Well, then, some hot chocolate, please."

But when Angela had closed the door, Sandra dropped her magazine and frowned intently. A service lift to the laboratory. Was it a possible entrance, or was it an absurd idea born of detective stories? Was the lift worked automatically by a button, or was it hand-hauled with pulleys? Probably the latter, judging from the age of the house. Yet all the other electric appliances were modern enough. And what kind of a lift was it, a sturdy platform designed originally to haul coals to otherwise unheated bedrooms in the last century? Or was it only meant to carry a light tray or two? She didn't have any urge to break her neck at the bottom of the shaft, she thought ruefully. Mysterious scuffles, wax figures—why the dickens don't I simply go to the police and ask them to investigate? But what if there's some plausible, even if odd explanation? What if Mark is beginning to guess what I'm after and sees to it that the laboratory is empty? No, I'll simply have to have

something more to go on before I dare to make an official complaint. I'm not even sure any longer that the figure was wax, so how could I honestly convince the police? Convince them enough so that they'd go to the length of getting an exhumation order? There'd have to be all kinds of formal preliminaries before the grave could be opened. What if Mark got wind of them and saw to it that a real body was in that grave? She shuddered, then tried to adjust her expression as Angela knocked and entered.

She hadn't really been hungry, but now the tray looked attractive. On its lacquered surface was a cup of egg-shell china and a pot of steaming chocolate. And Angela had exceeded instructions by supplying a tempting assortment of tiny sandwiches. After the maid had left, Sandra found herself attacking the food vigorously. When she had finished and set the tray outside the door as Angela had asked she locked the door and lit a cigarette. She felt warm and peaceful and drowsy as she stared into the fire with unwinking tawny eyes. Two hours to go. Perhaps it would be sensible to set the alarm of her traveling clock and go to sleep here on the chaise longue. The less thinking she did at this stage the better her nerves would be. She set the clock and closed her eyes.

Two hours later the little clock cleared its throat; then stung the silence with its tiny insistent buzz, like that of an angry wasp. Sandra started up, then looked around for a moment dazedly. The fire had died and the room seemed very cool and still. She splashed cold water on her face; then slipped into tennis shoes and slacks, tying a tasseled cummerbund around a waist that had grown a little too slim in those weeks of her grandfather's illness. Even Mark wasn't likely to be up at this hour, but if he were she had her alibi ready. She too

had heard noises and after Julie's report and Mark's scepticism had decided to investigate. He couldn't disprove it. But it will be much, much better for you, my girl, if you don't meet him at all, she warned herself grimly.

Switching off the lights in her room she opened her door and peered out into the corridor. It lay silent and empty in the dim glow of its night light. The tray was gone, presumably the field was hers. Suddenly her heart became turbulent, but compressing her lips she closed the door behind her and crept along the corridor, hugging the side of the wall. At the top of the stairs she paused, below was only a black well of night, soundless, waiting. The light that had burned here the other night was evidently not customary. But at least that argued that no servants still lingered to gossip in the great kitchens. She touched a pocket to make sure that the box of matches she had picked up was still there and then started down the stairs.

The light behind her scarcely picked out the first landing. When she reached that she would stand in utter darkness. She felt her throat tighten but her feet didn't hesitate. She stepped from shadowed dusk into ebon night, and the first ripples of real physical terror rose up about her.

5

FORTUNATELY THE THICK RUGS were soundless and though there were bare expanses, at least a stone floor didn't creak. She was familiar with this part of the house and found the breakfast room with little trouble. From this, she knew, opened the butler's pantry and beyond that a door to the kitchens. Having closed the breakfast-room door and so shut herself from the main part of the house, she moved with a freer step. Unless someone were in the kitchen she could no longer be heard.

She pushed open the swinging door to the butler's pantry and found herself on less familiar ground. Here she must strike the first match, wishing it would metamorphose itself into an electric torch. She listened intently but heard nothing except the insistent ticking of a corner clock. At the first flare of the match she located the other two doors, particularly that leading to the kitchen. But as she passed through, with the light still flaring close to her fingers, she saw that she was in still another pantry, or rather, silver room. It was here that the glass and silver were polished, evidently. Beyond lay the kitchen.

Quietly she pushed open the swinging door, but was reassured by the feel of soundproof cork linoleum beneath her feet. Another match must be sacrificed. She looked about the great room with its pastry room and store-closets beyond. It was an immense place and she could barely glimpse the stoves, while even from the massive copper pots were struck only

faint and transitory gleams of light. Frantically she peered around, then gasped as the match burnt her fingers. She lit another and carefully picked up the charred end. Even such trivial evidence musn't be left. But where was the service lift? Growing careless of her supply of light, she hurried around the room, then stopped short. Of course. The slide would undoubtedly be in the butler's pantry, where the trays were arranged.

Anxious at the thought of the time she had wasted, Sandra slipped back into the first pantry. But she became more careful. She had only eight matches left. Before lighting another she tried to visualize the room in her mind and then felt carefully around the walls, trying to locate a door or slide for which she could not account. Eventually she found a square slide, closed, at about the height of her waist. This must be the service lift. Now she lit another match and looked at the clock on the wall. It was nearly two. Dared she switch on the electricity? This was an inner room, with no windows, supplied only with a ventilator. All the doors were closed. Recklessly she located the switch and flooded the small room with light.

The slide was an ordinary one, tightly closed, and only its size indicated that it was a dumb-waiter. On the panel beside it were three buttons, labeled. Sandra studied them. They indicated the laboratory, the butler's pantry, the basement. She was not sure whether to regret that the lift was not an old-fashioned affair depending on hand-pulling of ropes. To be sure, yanking those ropes inside the shaft might have been difficult. On the other hand she would have been able to adjust her ascent as she chose. But with this automatic arrangement she would land, willy-nilly, immediately in front of the

laboratory slide, and would have no means of descent unless the button there were pushed. That button would of course be on the other side of the slide, and what if Mark kept it locked except when in use? She grew faint at the thought.

Of course in such a case she wouldn't be in actual physical danger, for in the morning she could make someone hear her. But she would have completely dished herself otherwise. She smiled wanly at the unintentional pun. And what if her prying did bring actual danger? If Mark were what she thought and feared, would he hesitate to—well, what would he do? She thrust her hands into her pockets for they had suddenly grown very cold.

Then she steadied herself and looked again at the slide. This one obviously had no key or lock. Dared she assume that the case was the same above? With grim determination she put her hand in the groove and prepared to push the door aside, but before she had moved it an inch she remembered the light. If the panel upstairs were ajar some ray might penetrate up the shaft and betray her. So she switched it out, then slowly opened the slide.

A chilling draft of air met her, laden with the cold of the cellars and faintly redolent of long forgotten food. She put out her hand and met nothing but air. With a shock she realized that she had overlooked a very simple possibility. The platform might very well be either in the cellar or upstairs, presumably the latter. But now that Sandra had really entered upon this thing she found in herself a new energy and courage. With hardly a pause she touched the middle button. There was the hum of well-oiled machinery. The platform was descending.

To her horror she heard the occasional clatter of dishes as

it approached her. What if someone were in the room above? But it was too late to worry about that now. As the platform stopped she reached into the darkness and felt the outlines of a small tray. Breathlessly she gripped it and gently laid it on the floor. Then she closed the slide door and switched on the light again. Perhaps the tray might tell her something if—she hardly dared formulate the thought—if it were a dinner tray. For Mark had of course dined with the family that evening. But her first glance disabused her. The tray carried only a whiskey glass, a coffee cup, and a plate empty of all but a few crumbs. Obviously Mark Caldwell's late snack. The coffee that still remained in the cup was stone cold and covered with a thin scum. So he must have long since turned in.

She put the tray on an inconspicuous shelf by the faucets, taking the chance that neither Becket nor the maids would be curious as to how it got there. Doubtless it was the duty of the first maid down in the morning. Then she turned off the light again. If after a wait of ten minutes no one came down to see who was working the lift she might safely assume that the noise had been unheard; that the room above was empty.

Crouched in a corner of the pantry, Sandra waited for what seemed an eternity, her hand always near the light switch. If any one did come to find her at least she'd meet him in the glare of the bulbs. The clock ticked slowly on. She scratched a match and in its brief light saw that eight minutes had passed. Surely time enough for any suspicious person to have reached the pantry.

She groped for the slide, pushed it open with little difficulty, for she was nimble, clambered upon the platform. It was a solid wooden affair, but she had a moment of acute faintness as she heard the ropes singing under the jar of her weight.

Then she reached around the corner and pushed the top button. Fortunately the machinery worked slowly so she had time to withdraw her arm before the platform passed the aperture. Now she was on her way, her retreat left unlighted and unguarded. Above her was only a Stygian darkness, for the lift fitted the walls to within the barest fraction of space. With a barely perceptible jar the mechanism halted. Now for the test.

Sandra listened alertly but could hear nothing but the whine of the draught. She put out a hand and touched the wall, and a section of it moved quite definitely under the insistent pressure of her fingers. There was complete darkness beyond and without allowing herself further time to consider she swung through the open slide. Pray heaven there was no object directly beneath her feet. She let herself down to the floor as carefully as possible and then, with a deep breath, struck one of her precious matches, sheltering the light from the draught with her cupped palm. Already in her brief escapade she had managed to master essentials. She took note of the single door, and through the darkness that smothered her again she felt her way across the room. The door was closed and the key was on this side, but she didn't dare lock it. She pushed the light button.

Her first reaction was of disappointment when she took time to look around.

This too was an inner room, like the pantry below, and but little larger; like the pantry too it was windowless, with a ventilator high in the wall. Stained sinks in a corner indicated that it had once been used as a dark-room. There were a table, a chair, an old couch. Very evidently the room was merely used for such meals as were sent up. Sandra paused in

indecision. But to leave now was to make her whole venture futile. She shivered and wished that she had worn a sweater. She moved over to the door again, turned off the light and reached for the door-knob. Then suddenly her heart gave one tremendous pound and seemed to stop beating.

Beyond the door had sounded a cautious voice. "Under the circumstances it seems to me that it would only be fair to—to adjust my compensation upward." Apparently the speakers had just entered the room beyond.

"Good Lord, Haskell, this is the devil of a time to wake me up to talk about anything!" Mark's voice held a rough, unfettered note that Sandra hadn't heard before.

"Well, I had to motor out from town, so I thought I might as well stop here on my way home. Kind of a long drive from Boston and I got to thinking."

Mark yawned audibly. "Thinking in terms of more money, eh? You were quite effusive about my generosity before you did the job."

There was a pause and then the other man's voice cut through the silence with a silky deliberation. "That was before I got the notion you were holding out on me, holding out on a lot of facts I got a right to know."

"Notions don't cut any ice with me. Go ahead and put two and two together and make five, if you want to. But get this, Haskell. I'm a bit fed up with you. I'd shoot the works before I'd let you dun me. Smells too much of blackmail. And if I shot the works, where would you be? Ah, that gets you, doesn't it!" Mark had answered with a coolness that showed unshaken nerves. At least he's a wolf, not a coyote, Sandra thought through her horror as he went on. "Jackson and Sarah Laidell knew what side their bread is buttered on. They are taking a

good wage and keeping their mouths shut. You'd better do the same, understand me? Not one cent more."

"You know I wouldn't talk either. It's just that—well, I don't sleep so good lately. I'm thinking of getting into business in a completely different line and since that would take dough, I just thought. . . ." The speaker's tones were sulky and a trifle uncertain now, as though Mark were standing very near him.

"Well, you've ditched any chance of a loan from me," Mark said. "I don't care for that kind of approach."

"Okay, okay," fretfully.

Mark's voice was cool and unresentful as he spoke again. "Good. But I'm sorry you have the jitters. Better stay tonight and see your family in the morning when you feel better. How about the Manning youngster? Did you give him my note?" Sandra gasped and leaned against the wall. So Ronald Manning was in this, too? Perhaps Julie? No, she'd take her oath against the latter possibility.

"Yes, he read it while I waited."

"He gave it back to you?"

"Here you are."

Mark sighed. "I wouldn't trust that note to anyone but myself to burn. How did he look when he read it?"

"White as a sheet. I took it out of his hand and walked away before he could ask any questions. Kind of rough on him when you come to think of it."

"He's a weak sister. I'd warned him twice. Where are you going?"

"Thought I heard a noise beyond that door. Do you mind?"

"Go ahead." Mark was indifferent. "It's a room with no window and that door is the only entrance or exit." But with

the first warning words Sandra had slipped away from the door. Now that she found herself confronted with an even greater danger than she had feared—for she knew she had heard too much for either man's comfort—her paralysis seemed to unlock. Had she closed the slide? Yes. In any event she wouldn't have time to reach it and descend. There was only one possible place of concealment in the bare little room, the couch. Halfway across the room she lowered herself to the floor and wriggled to the couch face down, partially hidden, she hoped, by the table. Just as the door was opening she had reached the edge of a blanket that trailed to the floor. With a sinuous and silent movement that she afterward decided would have done credit to a snake dancer, she crawled in behind its folds to the sheltered darkness under the springs.

The cot was a low one and the sagging iron spring touched her back as she lay there. If anyone sat on it she would be done for. She stifled an hysterical impulse to giggle as she pictured the shock which she might give to someone beside herself.

"Getting a bit edgy, aren't you, Haskell?" Mark asked as the room was flooded with light. There was a little pause as the two men evidently looked around. But just as evidently Haskell himself had been satisfied on his first entry.

"What's this thing?" he asked idly, stopping by the slide. "Oh, a service lift." To her horror Sandra heard the slide pushed open. "Same vintage as the house?"

"Yes. Used to be hand-operated." Then Mark's voice sounded a little puzzled. "I don't remember sending the tray down, but I must have, because the platform's empty."

Haskell's voice was dry. "Your servants must keep late

hours. It's after two now. And what'd they send the platform up empty for?"

"Oh, Becket's always on the prowl." Mark was indifferent. "Good thing you mentioned it though. I really can't have him bothering with such things after midnight. He's not as young as he used to be. Well, satisfied? I'm dead for sleep. You can turn in here if you like, and I'll see you out in the morning before anyone is up." Sandra heard him closing the slide.

"Thanks, Mr. Caldwell." The voice was slightly sheepish. "I hope you're not holding anything I said earlier against me. You know you can count on me to keep my mouth shut."

"I don't have to count on it." Mark was decisive. "I've fixed it that way. Come along and I'll find you some pajamas."

The voices died away in a further hall, but Sandra still lay there in a fury of anxiety. The room remained lighted and the door was open. Had she time to get to the slide before Haskell returned? She must. There was no other alternative. Swiftly she rolled out from under the couch. There was a moment when she must remain completely exposed and defenseless. With a deep breath and no backward glance—that was useless—she rose and opened the slide. No caution now for scraped knees and elbows. She flung herself in somehow on the platform and reached shaking fingers for the button. In another instant the platform had begun its slow, inexorable descent.

Would she reach the pantry before she was discovered? Would they remember that the slide above them had been closed and note that it was now partially open? For in her panic she had only managed to push it half shut before the platform bore her below arm's reach. And noting that, would they see that the platform was gone and press the button

above before she had a chance to get into the pantry? There was a roar in her ears and in the darkness all the colors of the kaleidoscope whirled before her. But she had never fainted, she wouldn't now. The platform halted. Her fingers, deft with terror, pulled her through the opening in one move. In another second she had sent the platform again on its slow ascent to the laboratory and had closed the slide.

Then Sandra sank in a trembling heap on the floor and crouched there for some minutes, hands pressed against her pounding heart.

Should she have sent the lift back again? Suppose they had seen the slide door half ajar and peering in had observed its actual ascent, and were now on their stealthy way to seize her? She stumbled to her feet at this thought. After all, she hadn't been more than two minutes from the couch to the pantry. There was every chance that Haskell, at least, hadn't returned to the room in that time. As for Mark, he had loudly announced his earnest desire to return to bed. She drew a long sigh. Perhaps she was safe. But one thing was certain, the sooner she reached her room, the better.

How long had she been here? Had that wave of after-terror engulfed her five minutes or fifteen? She couldn't tell, but her feet were winged now in their eagerness to be as far from this particular spot as possible. She reached the great front hall with little difficulty. In another moment she had put her foot on the first of the wide shallow stairs. Then it was that she heard the sounds in the room across the hall. Quick as a flash she turned about so that she appeared to be descending, rather than ascending the stairs. Even as she took her new position, a great block of soft golden light illuminated the stone-paved floor with its rich oriental rugs, a block of light thrown from

the open door of Mark Caldwell's library. Like a monstrous silhouette pasted on a gold-leaf the man himself stood there, his hands thrust deep into the pockets of his dressing-gown.

"The unusual widow again," he said in his icy, deliberate voice. "What is it this time, insomnia or curiosity?"

6

SANDRA THANKED HER STARS that her present position was more plausible of explanation than that of a few minutes previous.

"Oh, it's you, Mark," she exclaimed with that ingenuous little air that she occasionally adopted to annoy him. "I was sure I heard someone go along the corridor and creep down the stairs." That was safe enough. He'd had five or ten minutes to come from the laboratory and would hardly have chosen to run the torturous outside route from the bridge door, at least in his present attire. He took a step or two toward her and she gripped the stair rail. Better get her story in first, before he confused her.

"It's late and I was nervous thinking of Julie's story, you know."

"You're courageous."

Sandra flashed her most fatuous smile. "Thank you. I just got up some spunk and came down to investigate. I hope I didn't startle you?" she added with an earnest air of concern.

Did the man's lips twitch? She peered at him but his back was to the light. "And all prepared for alarms and excursions," he commented, glancing at her slacks and the black silk cummerbund pleated around the slim waist, its tasseled ends jaunty over one hip.

"I've always been able to dress quickly." Her trailing tone modestly disclaimed any praise.

"Well, now that you're here, come on into the library a moment."

"Do you know what time it is?"

"The hour doesn't keep you from investigating strange noises and prowling footsteps," he pointed out reasonably. "I'm sure that it's so early or so late that even Mrs. Grundy has given up the ghost."

"But, Mark—" No use. He had already taken her arm and with a quite gentle but firm insistence was shepherding her into the library. Somehow she found herself in the room and the door again closed without further protest. "I don't know what Julie would think," she murmured, and was afraid that her attempt at shy confusion was distorting her face. Beneath her outer expression it felt rigid with fright.

"Julie hasn't been out in the world sufficiently to acquire prudery," he assured her with a grim smile. "Sit down there. I have a call in to Washington but it won't take me a moment." As the phone rang he went toward it, glancing back. "Comfortable?"

Sandra had to admit that she was as she settled into an enfolding armchair. And a telephone was a reassuring instrument reminding one that the outside world was really close, a world of telephones and fast police cars. Her heart quieted. The soft, concealed radiance in which the room swam had an almost soporific effect, at least at this hour of the morning, and her eyelids felt heavy with the golden glow. At first her ears were heedless of Mark's voice.

"That you, Charles? Sorry to wake you at this hour but I thought you'd better know. Haskell doesn't seem quite satisfied with the contract. No, no, nothing to get into a stew about, but I think I'll ship him off to you tomorrow. Maybe

a talk with one of the nation's shining lights will straighten him out." Mark listened, frowning, to hurried words from the other end of the line. Sandra, too, was alert now. "I know," he interrupted patiently, "but this was the way you wanted it. You'll have to help out once in a while. . . . No, go ahead. I'm talking from the library phone. And listen, it wouldn't do any harm if he met a few of your impressive cronies. . . . Oh, all right, all right. Do it your own way. So long."

Mark droppd the receiver and turned with a smile. "Charles is a balky old horse," he grumbled comfortably. "Lazy too. He expects me to handle half his affairs as well as mine." Sandra felt a faint disappointment. This telephone conversation in her presence robbed her laboratory eavesdropping of much of its importance. Whoever Haskell was he couldn't have any connection with Jim's affairs or Mark would hardly have talked about him to the Senator in front of her. She looked at Mark directly for the first time since she had entered the room. He was opening a small carved cabinet and taking from it two goblets and a small vase-like bottle as delicately chased as some perfume accessory.

"You look cold and tired," he said. "How about a little of this cordial?" He half filled both tiny glasses as he spoke and then approached her with a matter-of-fact air. Sandra hesitated. Was it a drug? Yet even if it were, why refuse when he could so easily give it to her some other time by stealth? That is, unless she was prepared to leave this house at once. And if it weren't drugged she would simply be arousing suspicions even more. Perhaps he was testing her credulity.

She took the glass with as steady a hand as she could and

lifted it to her lips. The liquid swayed heavily like molten gold with a greenish tinge, and from it arose a heady aroma that was not unpleasant. She sipped it. "You're not drinking yours, Mark . . ." and then she saw that he must have already done so for his goblet stood on the table empty. For a moment she paused and then with no further hesitation finished her own. It burned through her and in a few moments seemed to permeate her entire body with a slow lassitude of warmth and perfume and light. The room seemed clearer and more distinct, yet at the same time far-away as though she were viewing objects from a pair of opera glasses.

"Delicious," she admitted. "What is it?" And noted at the same time how carefully modulated her tones sounded.

Mark seated himself on the couch close beside her. "A cordial I concocted myself," he answered. "One of the trivial things I amuse myself with when my brain is tired. But it's good. In fact, there's nothing quite like it that I know of. Gives you complete relaxation without any slowing up of the mental processes. Not a safe thing to take often or in quantity, but just right for the right occasion."

Sandra found herself amused, with an indifferent amusement that delighted and surprised her. "This is the right occasion then?"

"I think so." He stared at her a moment, then added abruptly, "Sandra, do you like me?"

A small bell tinkled somewhere in Sandra's mind, then faded away as she ignored it. "You have the type of looks that women fall for in droves," she said promptly, "but I expect you've always known that, so why ask me? Or was that what you asked me? I've forgotten."

Mark traced the pattern on the couch arm without looking

up. "No, that wasn't what I asked. But let's skip the original question. Considering the circumstances, it was a rottenly unfair thing to do."

"What circumstances?"

"I couldn't explain now. And in any event I have some equally impertinent questions to put."

"Well?"

"Here's one. Have you any intention, at least at the present moment, of marrying again?"

Sandra leaned her head back so that the long white bow of her throat was taut. Her eyes were half shut. Why should Mark have asked this, unless he knew such a marriage on her part would be illegal? And how could it be illegal, unless Jim were still alive?

"That's an odd question," she admitted, "but I don't mind answering it. Rather apparent, isn't it, that if I were interested in someone else, I wouldn't have married Jim?"

"But it's been months since then and you might have met someone in the meantime. And realizing that your marriage would end in six months . . ."

"Well, there isn't anyone," Sandra said rather tartly. As she spoke she wondered why she had answered so truthfully. To have pretended that she did intend to marry soon might have brought from Mark a guarded warning that would have given him away. Yet somehow it seemed unnecessary to lie. She felt possessed of an Olympian confidence right now. Let Mark produce a whole questionnaire if he wanted. She knew she was quite capable of handling any situation, however delicate. . . . What was he saying now?

"—but the marriage was a real marriage? As I understand it, you were with Jim a few days?"

Sandra scowled. "But I didn't say that." Her voice was troubled. "It isn't true, so how could I have said it? He left me right after the ceremony and I went to Mexico very shortly. Of course, it doesn't matter to you one way or the other, but I told you the truth."

Somehow the truth seemed terrifically important at this moment. A hand tightened on hers. She looked down and saw for the first time the firm brown fingers that all but concealed her own. How long had he been holding her hand? But the touch was very impersonal and it hardly seemed important enough to make a scene about. Then she yawned. Though she knew they had only been talking a few minutes her body felt cramped and tired suddenly as though she had been sitting there for some time. She rose with dignity. "I think, if you don't mind, I'll lie down on the other divan," she announced and forthwith proceeded to do so. She watched the man with untroubled eyes as he rose, hesitated and then approached her.

"You'd better let me see you upstairs," he suggested and there was the smallest hint of anxiety behind the mask of his eyes. Sandra shook her head owlishly.

"Very comfortable, thanks," she stated. Her own eyes closed inexorably. Someone was putting arms beneath her shoulders and lifting her to a sitting position. She was indignant but not sufficiently indignant to open her eyes. This was Jim she decided placidly, who had come to find her and who was holding her so closely and carefully in his arms, carrying her to safety. He would understand that she was very sleepy and didn't want to talk much. But she made one effort, half raising her face.

"I'll take care of Julie," she promised. "She'll get the money, everything."

She heard the half-whisper, "Don't try to wake up," and felt lips hover over her mouth, then move reluctantly to press her cheek instead. That was nice, she reflected, but it was too bad to be kissed when she was sleepy. Wasteful, somehow. . . .

Hours later Sandra opened her eyes and then closed them quickly for she found that though her mind was clear her head throbbed unbearably. There were low voices across the room and she listened, at first with disinterest.

"You sure she'll be all right, Mr. Mark? She looks kind of pale, and she slept right past luncheon."

"She's all right, Marta. Her head may ache a bit, that's all." He laughed shortly. "But she might as well not have had the stuff. It hit her so soon, I didn't have a chance to ask her much. By the way, take a look at this. What is it?"

Sandra was very much alert now. She didn't open her eyes though her head moved noiselessly on the pillow so that she might catch every word. Did his comment mean that she had been drugged? And what was Marta to look at?

The woman's voice was a trifle bewildered. "It's just a common silk tassel, Mr. Mark, far as I can see."

"But I found it in a corner of my service lift."

"I'm afraid I still don't see."

Mark's voice was impatient. "You can see that Mrs. Demarest is wearing a cummerbund with her slacks. And it had tassels on each end. How did one of those tassels get into the lift?"

Marta was dubious. "Are you sure it's hers? You see them

black silk tassels most everywhere. They're common as dirt. Two of the maids have them on dresses."

"Look and see if one is missing from Mrs. Demarest's sash."

Sandra shifted the arm which was flung across her forehead so that it shadowed her eyes. She doubted her ability to keep her eyelids from twitching under close scrutiny. Marta crossed the room and bent over her. Then she stepped back. "The sash ends are twisted under her. Shall I move her, sir?"

"No, she ought to be awake in less than an hour. Bring her tray yourself, and take a look then. It may be from one of the maids' dresses of course, but it's a coincidence. . . . How's Julie's feeling?"

"One of her difficult days, Mr. Mark. Sometimes I wonder if she won't have to go the same way that her brother . . ."

"You'll wake Mrs. Demarest. Come on outside."

The door closed softly and for a few minutes more Sandra heard the unintelligible murmur of voices beyond it. Then brisk footfalls down the corridor told her she was alone. As she sat up in bed she found that her forehead was wet with perspiration and that her incipient headache had vanished in the more overpowering emotion of fear. So Mark suspected her of having been near the service lift. But his suspicion was not confirmed yet. She untwisted the cummerbund and looked at it. There should have been a black silk tassel at each end, but one was missing. She couldn't conceal the sash. That would be as strong a proof. How long before Marta would come with the tray? A half hour, perhaps. Whatever she was to do she must do quickly. Jumping from the bed, she locked the corridor door and then tiptoed across to the little work-basket that stood on a window table. It had been so long unused by any guest that the tiny scissors squeaked. But the

needles were unrusted and there were both white spools and black.

She sat down and with fingers that shook snipped the one remaining tassel from her girdle and set to work to divide it into two equal masses of clinging strands. It was a difficult task with her head swimming, and her heart constricted with anxiety. The silky strands clung to her fingers and did their utmost to hamper but at the end of fifteen minutes she had produced two tassels from the one and had sewed them firmly to the ends of the cummerbund. They were skimpier of course, but she doubted that either Marta or Mark would notice that. She replaced the thread and scissors exactly as they had been in the basket and picking up a few detached strands from the floor she scattered them in the ashes of the fireplace.

Then she unlocked her door and lay down on the bed again, pulling the puff about her as it had been. Her tiny ruse, futile as it might prove to be, had restored her confidence a little and now she could let her thoughts wander over the incidents of the night before and try to digest the none too guarded comments just made in her room. Mysterious if she had been drugged, for Mark had had a glass from the same bottle. But suppose it had merely been a high-proof liqueur or brandy of some kind? Even though she'd never had anything but wine before, surely such a tiny gobletful of any liquor at all couldn't have had that effect. Of course she had been tired and over-strained. Her cheeks felt hot as she dimly remembered being carried upstairs, talking ridiculously and confidently.

What had she talked about? Had Mark really kissed her? No, that idea was absurd. And she couldn't have talked too

much either, for if she had he'd know of her escapade and wouldn't have had to wonder over the tassel business. Well, he'd shown his hand to her rather completely now at any rate, though he couldn't know that. Had she enough evidence for the police? Had she any evidence? Not yet. Mark would insist that her present state was due to an excess of alcohol. How about the conversation she had overheard in the laboratory? In the light of Mark's call to the Senator, the Haskell affair probably involved only some prosaic, if rather shady, business deal. No, if she approached the police at this stage she would simply be laughed at, and would forewarn Mark as well. Even if the original figure in the coffin had been wax, it would be all too easy for Mark to substitute the remains of a real body if he sensed a whisper of suspicion. Her very eagerness might condemn Jim.

But she did have enough evidence to give Julie. She hadn't wanted to drag Julie into it, but now she had to have some help because from now on she herself would be closely watched, however slight Mark's suspicions were. Then too . . . she bit her lips and faced for the first time the implication in that last comment of Marta's. Those words had lain like coiled serpents in her mind, steadily as she had tried to ignore them. Now they rose and struck again. "Sometimes I wonder if she won't have to go the same way that her brother did." Yes, Julie was in danger, though Sandra wouldn't dare tell her that. Julie, with her over emotional temperament, would simply confront Mark at once, and so ruin every chance of exposing him. But at least she could tell Julie something.

There was a knock at the door and without waiting for an answer Marta walked in with a tray. Sandra threw out her arms and yawned. Then she sat up in bed and looked be-

wilderedly at her fully dressed figure. "What on earth, Marta. . . ."

Marta put the tray on the bedside stand and looked down at Sandra, not unkindly. "Well, Mrs. Demarest, you seem to have slept in your clothes, it's a fact. Don't you worry about it. Sit up a mite straighter and I'll slip this rest behind you."

"But, Marta, I don't understand. What time is it? I never had anything like this happen before."

"There always has to be a first time," Marta said dryly. "And if you don't mind my seeming impertinent—I'm an old woman—maybe you've learnt something easier than you might. I'm sure Mr. Mark is more to blame than you for not seeing that you haven't a good head for liquor. And being in the family as long as I have I took the liberty of telling him so. I may say he took it very well indeed. Says it's all his fault and you aren't to be upset, Mrs. Demarest." She dropped the subject firmly by adding, "It's close to four."

Sandra sank against the back-rest during this barrage, but her lips twitched. If she hadn't overheard that conversation, Marta would have had her convinced. But perhaps she had protested enough. If she continued to be inquisitive they'd know she was suspicious that she had had something other than an ordinary brandy. So she simply said faintly, "I'm so ashamed. How did I get upstairs? The whole thing is a haze."

She saw a gleam of satisfaction in the woman's eyes, quickly suppressed. "Mr. Mark carried you up, Mrs. Demarest, and he didn't call anyone to make you more comfortable because he thought that you'd feel better today if the house wasn't roused."

"I see," Sandra interrupted hastily. She found the implication almost as distasteful as though it had been true. "Kind

of him, though not kind to give me something my head wouldn't stand." She smiled shamefacedly. "I think I'll freshen up a bit before I eat," and she slipped out of bed.

Marta picked up her clothes as she discarded them. "I'll see your slacks are pressed, ma'am."

"Thank you." Sandra was demure as she put on her negligée and saw Marta pass the cummerbund through her hands. A little later as she was eating Marta answered a tap on the door.

"Mrs. Demarest awake yet?"

"Yes sir. Having her tray."

"Good. Possible for me to speak to her a moment?"

Sandra nodded to Marta's questioning look. "She says come in, Mr. Mark. And by the way, you know those things you asked me to look for? I found both of 'em, sir."

"Fine, that's off my mind then." And as he entered the room Marta departed, leaving the door ajar a decorous six inches.

Sandra paused with her cup at her lips and looked up at Mark. There was a suppressed virility about his whole expression that startled her a little, as though she saw color and life steal into the head of a bronze Roman coin. Or perhaps, she thought wryly, a better simile would be: anaconda stirring from winter sleep.

"May I sit down?" He smiled sheepishly. "I've come to apologize for last night. I should have known that particular liqueur was only for a hard-boiled male constitution."

Sandra hesitated. What attitude did he expect her to take? She couldn't give him the lie direct. That would mean her own swift departure from the house. On the other hand, he'd expect some injured protest. So her voice was very dignified.

"I admit I'm not used to anything but wine. Even so, I don't see how a mere liqueur—"

"Don't dare call my heavenly invention a mere liqueur!" he interrupted gaily. "It's in a class by itself, so you needn't feel embarrassed. I've only tried it on myself—with excellent results—and like a fool I didn't take into account the fact that everyone reacts differently to such things. Please forgive me. I promise you no one knows about it except Marta and me. And she gave me a good dressing down." He leaned forward and put a coaxing hand over Sandra's. "Am I forgiven?"

Sandra didn't look at him. "If I could remember what effect the stuff had on me, besides putting me to sleep, maybe I'd feel better about it. But I can't seem to remember anything."

"Not a single thing?"

"Only a vague notion that I talked and talked. Was I dreadful?"

"No. You were very sweet." His voice was almost inaudible and Sandra withdrew her hand.

"I'd prefer to think I was dignified. However, you're forgiven." Her voice was empty and he stood up.

"Thank you. Will you be down to dinner? I told Julie you had a sick headache and weren't to be disturbed until then."

She nodded. "I'll be down but don't expect me to eat anything after gorging like this."

He paused at the door. "I'm glad to see you gorging for once. You're a bit fragile looking, you know. And we wouldn't want you to suffer from your stay here."

Sandra looked thoughtfully at the door he closed behind him. Was that last remark a conventionally kind one or did it contain an ironic warning? His whole manner had been

somehow strange: coaxing, triumphant. She could see that Mark had a dark charm of his own when he troubled to exert it, as he had just now. Had he decided to resort to gallantry? She fervently hoped not. The situation would be doubly difficult. Moreover when his eyes warmed they were troubling, almost confusing.

She stood up energetically. To the devil with Mark. Jim was her immediate problem. She'd get Julie to show her Jim's old room—she had shrunk from it until now—but perhaps there would be papers, letters, something that would give her a clue, though it was unlikely. Mark would have seen to that. But the errand would give her an opening wedge to confide in Julie. No, perhaps she had better let that wait until after dinner. Julie would never be able to control herself in front of Mark on such short notice.

Sandra put on the bronze-gold taffeta. A bit too spectacular, perhaps, but it made her look sophisticated and she felt an urgent need for that confidence. Hair high and the barbaric Mexican earrings . . . there. Even Mark's eyes couldn't abash the bland creature who looked back at her from the mirror. The creature, in fact, looked so smug that Sandra made a horrible face at her. Always a good thing to keep yourself in hand.

Julie was sitting on the window seat, her face a distorted frown, her heels kicking the woodwork viciously. She jumped up at Sandra's entrance. "Why, you don't look ill at all! I've been so bored all day; no one to talk to, nothing to do. It only needed a funeral to make this house the last straw! Don't look at me like that. You know I adored Jim, but everything's so beastly. I could jump out a window."

Sandra smiled, but inwardly she was despairing. Did she

dare trust this mercurial youngster who was sometimes a languorous-eyed sophisticate and sometimes a tantrumy, selfish imp? Didn't Julie confide too readily, forgive too easily, to be told a secret that might mean life or death? But after all, if it were Julie's life or death too? "I'm okay now. Listen, Julie, you said sometime you'd show me Jim's old room. How about now? Or would that just depress you more?"

"I'd love to. I was just ugly because I was lonesome. Come on."

Sandra found herself shivering as they paused before a closed door. Was there anything in the theory that rooms held personalities or the influence of those personalities? It was inconsistent of her to be disappointed as she stepped across the threshold. It was a large room, a combined bedroom and study, as cheerful and ordinary and crowded with conglomerate objects as are the majority of rooms in which a male has lived from hobby-horse days through college years. Beyond it was a bath. The place was neat now in a heart-breaking way. The myriad photographs and framed portraits had been carefully aligned, the ashtrays shone immaculately, the three leather armchairs had been drawn back against the walls in the manner of a dentist's waiting-room. Only the moth-eaten old bear rug that lay before the hearth still retained a fetching leer, for one of its eyes was missing.

"Looks like a barracks," Julie said discontentedly.

"I suppose everything's been cleaned out of his desk?"

"Yes, but all his old snapshot albums and other stuff of that sort are probably stuck away in his closet. I'll look for them if you like." Sandra nodded and continued to study a crew picture. It was difficult to trace any resemblance between the man she had known so briefly and this young face squinting

against the sun. Julie threw open the closed door and gasped. "What a mess! Well I suppose Marta thought Mark and I would want to go over things. Here are the albums." She yanked so vigorously at the dusty books piled on the high shelf that she was almost submerged by an avalanche of them. She perched on the arm of Sandra's chair.

"Look, isn't this one a scream? It's Mark. And the little boy is Jim."

"Is that Mark?"

"Yes. He's grown quite a bit thinner these last years. Used to be on the stocky side. You know he was fullback in college and his nickname was Hurricane. Here I am with him. I was only ten then."

"He seems to have done his share of sticking around with you youngsters," Sandra murmured. Julie shrugged.

"Oh, Jim and I used to be crazy about him. But as soon as Jim was old enough to be a little independent Mark made him feel the apron strings all right." She sighed. "I suppose everyone has some decent feelings and I really think Mark did care about us when we were little, and he didn't have to worry about our money coming to us. Money! Sometimes I'd like to tell him to take the lot and I'd get out. But I don't dare. When he looks at me a certain way I'm just dough. Then he talks me around and we start the vicious circle all over."

Sandra listened in silence. Was this the moment to speak? She glanced at her wrist watch. No, too soon before dinner. Julie must be composed at that meal. But she put out a comforting hand.

"I know. I need your advice about something too. May I talk to you after dinner?"

"Yes, yes!" Julie stood up and began pacing the floor with

her long swaying stride. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes bright. She leaned down and seized Sandra's hands. "Oh, Sandra, don't let him talk you around. Between him and Marta I haven't drawn a clear breath until you came. I haven't had a chance to tell you before but I was locked in my room last night. That wasn't a dream. Why did they do that? It frightens me. Something terrible has been coming closer ever since Jim died. I feel it, I feel it!"

Suddenly she flung herself on her knees and buried her head in Sandra's lap and burst into tears. Sandra's voice was soft but imperative. "Julie, I know. But you've promised to help me sensibly. Now your eyes are all red. We won't talk any more now. Keep a stiff upper lip. I won't let you down, I promise. Please, Julie."

Julie struggled to her feet and tried to smile. "I'll try honestly. Will you pick up these things while I bathe my eyes?" She hurried from the room. Sandra was thoughtful as she gathered the albums together. She felt thoroughly discouraged with the only instrument to her hand—an adolescent, excitable child, an adorable spit-fire. It was a heavy responsibility she was taking on herself to fill that receptive mind with a new and terrible puzzle. Yet it would be a greater responsibility to leave Julie in ignorance. The locked door, had Julie imagined it? But after all, she thought bitterly, no harder to imagine a locked door than to imagine a drug.

She crossed to the closet and swung the heavy books one by one to the high shelf. Tall as she was it was still a task, and she leaned against the wall with one hand while with the other she shoved the volumes back so that they wouldn't slide to the floor. As she did so the wall gave beneath her hand.

She stepped back as though she had burned her fingers.

Then she flung the closet door wide to give more light and looked again. It was a very ordinary arrangement that she noted and one that needn't have startled her. What she had taken to be a solid wall was merely a door connecting two similar closets, a door which had a high shelf on each side. Since the unlocked door opened the other way her weight and the weight of the books had made it swing open. She felt for the knob and pulled the door shut again. Then she returned to Jim's room.

It had windows on two sides and from one she could look diagonally across to the laboratory wing. This room adjoined the wing. So it followed that the second closet into which she had almost fallen belonged to a room in the laboratory. It seemed hardly possible that with all his precautions Mark should have left the further door of that closet unlocked. It was almost too much to hope. Did she have time to try it now? She entered the closet again and pushed carefully against the inner door. It swung open. The further closet was pitch dark, but she felt for the key to the connecting door. Now it was in her hand. Should she keep it? No, that would be too dangerous. She knelt down and slipped the key under the edge of the straw matting. If Mark didn't think of this door he wouldn't notice that the key was gone. If, on the other hand, he looked for it carefully he would find it caught in the matting and assume that it had fallen there by accident.

Three minutes later Sandra was in her own room ruefully brushing the dustmarks from her gown. The notes of the first call sounded, Chinese notes, mellow with age. She walked out to the head of the stairs and on an impulse paused, her hand resting only lightly on the rail; for though the wood was polished velvet to the touch it creaked with age and

swayed with the whisper of a tremor along its whole length. It was a striking scene she looked at, for the fire in the great hearth stabbed upward with red daggers and yet made little headway against the shadows which masked most of the hall. The wall sconces were beneath the balcony and did little more than deepen the gloom beyond their rays. Julie and Mark stood in front of the fire, curiously foreshortened from this height. Stood silently. The firelight tortured Julie's yellow hair into tiny flames of its own and drew two points of satanically horned shadow above Mark's temples. Then without raising his head Mark spoke.

"Going to join us, Sandra? Look, Julie, the Blessed Damozel with her great dark eyes and—but was that a compassionate look, Sandra?" Sandra went down the stairs, feeling her dignity a bit shaken.

"Have you eyes in the back of your head?" she asked tartly. Mark grinned and teetered back and forth on his heels.

"Don't need 'em, as long as we have an excellent mirror over the fireplace."

Sandra was cool again. "Frankly, I don't care much for the general architecture of the house, but I think this hall is the most beautiful one I've ever seen. I like to stand on the balcony and just gape, every time I go by."

Mark said, "I appreciated my picture too." And then the second gong rang.

Julie was petulant. "I wish we could have dinner announced instead of being called to chow like farmhands, Mark."

He was imperturbable. "That gong is several hundred years old. Where could we find an equally experienced human voice to tell us to eat, drink and be merry?" He tucked Sandra's hand into the curve of his arm. "Sandra here, is more

discriminating. She's picked out the one spot in the house that dates from colonial days. This hall," he went on to Sandra, "is part of the original homestead. The rest is an extravagant and unhappy thought on the part of my esteemed grandfather." Since Mark had taken her hand as though to lead her into the dining-room Sandra could hardly pull away. He went on, ignoring the rigid tenseness of the fingers pressed to his side. "Circa eighteen-seventy. Mansard out of gingerbread. I can remember that grandfather used to wander around the place every Sunday, happily counting the cupolas and balconies."

"Well, it's a beautiful hall anyway," Sandra said and stepped firmly toward the dining-room.

7

MARK SAT EATING PLACIDLY and let Julie's aimless chatter flow around him. Sandra, already aware of Julia's prowess at monologue, suspected that he was taking base advantage of the fact that Julie had a new audience. Sandra herself was developing the technique of pursuing her own thoughts while still following the general current of Julie's talk.

"The spookiest thing in the book was this Professor Wendell," Julie was going on. "Of course that isn't his real name, because even now the British don't want to give it. Anyhow, he's the greatest genius in the world on radio detection and that sort of thing. So his big job at Dieppe was to find out what the Germans had on the beach in his line. Get the picture. He lands on the beach with four soldiers guarding him, with drawn guns. And he knows that their one job is to shoot him if there's any danger of the Germans capturing him."

Sandra, really interested now, said, "The British were afraid he'd talk if he were tortured enough?"

Julie was triumphant. "They knew he'd talk, torture or no torture! Because why? Because the Germans have some drug that makes anyone tell the truth. On the same order as scopalamine, I suppose, only this is sure fire they say."

Mark glanced up for the first time. "What's this? Oppenheim thriller?"

Julie made a face at him. "A true story, so there. Quentin Reynolds' account of the Dieppe raid, *Dress Rehearsal.* Out

ages ago but I just got down to reading it today because there wasn't another damn thing to do. You American chemists are such wows," she added maliciously, "I should think you'd know just what that German drug is, by now."

Sandra dipped her fingers into the finger bowl a third time. She didn't dare look at Mark and have him read her sudden conviction, let him know that a liqueur goblet had found its place in the mosaic of her suspicions. He took rather a long time lighting his cigarette but his voice was airy enough. "Even if one knew what the drug was—if there is such a drug —then what?" he asked. "We knew for years that the Nazis had planes and tanks and guns. That mere knowledge was worthless."

Julie leaned forward. "You mean that the important thing is to find an antidote or whatever you call it? Some sort of preventive drug that would cancel the other beforehand?"

Mark laughed. "I mean I'm trying to carry my share of the dinner conversation, Julie." He pushed back his chair and Julie stood up reluctantly at that hint.

"So you won't talk, eh? Well, come on, Sandra, let's have another shot at Jim's albums."

Mark looked genuinely disappointed. "No gin rummy tonight? Or how about letting a mere man join you up there? I dote on albums."

Julie shook her head and blew a kiss at him as they walked into the hall. Then she started up the stairs. "The oracle has spoken," Sandra said, trying to infuse a little casual friendliness into her voice. "Mere man is in a minority tonight."

"If you change your mind I'll be in the library." She was acutely conscious that his eyes followed her until she reached the obscurity of the first landing.

In Julie's room Marta was engaged in sorting and mending lingerie. Julie interrupted her impatiently. "Let that wait until tomorrow," she said. "You can go now for the night. I won't want my hair brushed."

"I could do the clothes in the other room, Miss Julie," Marta pointed out. "And you know there's not a night been missed brushing your hair."

"I shan't want you again tonight," Julie repeated, and Sandra saw that she was keeping her temper with an effort. Marta moved to the door, her expression unchanging. Julie followed her, very deliberately removed the key and held it up in front of Marta. "Let's keep the key on this side of the door after this, Marta. Good-night."

"Good-night, Miss Julie—Mrs. Demarest." Marta left, her face still imperturbable, and Sandra was forced into unwilling admiration. Whatever the evil in Marta's nature she was neither stupid nor lacking in dignity.

Julie locked the door and turned with a flushed face. "Doesn't that prove the door was locked last night?" she half-whispered. "If Marta didn't know anything about it she'd have asked me what I meant. Old Stony-face!"

Sandra looked at her dubiously. "Perhaps you shouldn't have said anything. Now they know you're on your guard. Well, there's no use worrying about that. Julie, I'm going to put all my cards on the table for you tonight. Maybe I'm wrong to do it. But right or wrong, if I do tell you you'll have to promise you won't do or say anything without talking to me first. Agreed?"

Julie's eyes were very round. "Of course. Go ahead."

There was a long silence. The words caught in Sandra's throat, and she searched her mind for some sign, some in-

tuition that these words—irrevocable after they were spoken—should nevertheless be said. Yet how could she hesitate to use any means to safeguard Julie? So in a steady voice she began to speak. She spoke of a waxen image. And not allowing herself to be halted by Julie's stricken gasp, she went on—a service lift, Haskell, a strange and menacing conversation. Finally, a drug.

"And it's only fair to tell you," she added quietly, "that I heard the name Manning mentioned by Mark and this Haskell. Of course the name is a common one and it might not mean Ronald Manning. Probably not, because Mark spoke of a letter he had sent Manning, a letter that frightened him. And said Manning was to blame for having gotten himself into some kind of a jam."

"It couldn't have been Ronny," Julie's voice was stifled, "because he and Uncle Mark hate each other. Mark's thrown him politely out already, so why should he have written him a letter? And why should the letter frighten Ronny?"

"All that isn't too important, anyway," Sandra said a little wearily. "Whatever Manning he was talking about. We've enough to keep us busy. Did you take in what Marta said to your uncle this afternoon when they thought I was still under the drug? That you had been 'difficult' and 'might have to go the same way Jim did'?"

Julie's voice was husky with strain and horror. "I can't believe it, I can't! Mark . . . when I was little I loved him. Oh, God!"

Sandra was half frightened by that voice. She had braced herself for stormy tears and hysterics. But her wish had been fulfilled with a vengeance. Here was a dry-eyed, frozen-faced woman who stood with clasped and immobile hands in front

of her. It was a terrible thing to see those volcanic eyes in that still face. "Sandra, what are we going to do? We can't just sit still to be drugged, locked up, perhaps butchered!"

Sandra shuddered. "Sit down again, Julie. Mark doesn't really suspect us yet. He's just more and more worried that we might stumble on something, because every day he sees how much deeper he's sinking in. At the first definite sign from us it will be all over. So first of all we've got to be careful not to show that sign." She hesitated. "No more tantrums from you or wise-cracking from me."

"Let's not overdo it," Julie said shrewdly. "He knows I'm still angry about Ronny and he'd be terribly suspicious if I didn't blow up once in a while. But I'll soft-pedal."

Sandra said suddenly, "What did Marta mean about your growing more 'difficult'?"

Julie was shamefaced. "I'm not like you, Sandra. Every time I'm mad, it boils right out. And lately I'm afraid I've taken to throwing things—hitting out, you know. Really it makes me feel better and I'm quite meek afterward. The last time, Marta just picked me up and dunked me into a tub of cold water. But she needn't have. I was all through only she didn't know it." Julie grinned her gamine grin and her face was as smooth and untroubled as it had ever been. Impossible to even remember her expression a few minutes ago. "Listen," she said, "how about getting Ronny to help us?"

"No." Sandra shook her head. "He couldn't hang around the grounds. All he could give us would be advice, even if we could get in touch with him when we needed to." She stood up. "Let's find out right now if the closet to the laboratory room is unlocked. We can pretend to be looking at the al-

bums. One of us can watch the corridor while the other is in the closet." They crossed to Jim's room.

"Which of us watches?" Julie's eyes burned with an eager light.

"You. I'll go through and see what I can find. Cough if you hear anyone coming. Toss me the matches." Sandra pushed open the inner door of the closet and stood in the darkness of the further side. A dim glow filtered through to her from Jim's room, but she almost extinguished that by closing the door until only an inch was left which would let her hear any warning cough from Julie. Then with trepidation she struck a match.

This second closet was empty of all clothes, but at one end lay a dusty pile of magazines and papers. They were for the most part chemical journals and trade magazines. She was about to stand up again when a bulky object pushed behind the pile attracted her attention. The light of the third match flickering upon this object brought a suppressed exclamation to her lips. But she couldn't examine it more closely now. First her errand must be accomplished. Her pulse beat high as she laid a hand on the knob of the further door.

Was anyone behind that door? Were there hostile ears ready to catch the slightest sound? Or were there hopeful eyes which watched that door for a message of release?

Slowly the knob turned in her hand until it had completed its revolution. Then with the merest perceptible motion she pushed against the door. It gave before her only a fraction of an inch, but that inch meant triumph. The way was clear to the laboratory. Silently she drew the door back into place and released the knob. She reentered the closet beyond and

thrust an inquiring head into the room. Julie nodded reassuringly and then came forward as Sandra beckoned.

They returned to the shelf where Sandra had seen that bulky object. Another match revealed it fully to both of them. It was a life-sized bust of James Caldwell Demarest, done in bronze. It did not stand on its pedestal but lay, face up, on a bed of soft material in which it had obviously once been crated.

"Jim always hated it," Julie said in an awed tone, "though the rest of us thought it was fine. It was done only two years ago but he wouldn't have it around and I'd forgotten all about it. Is the laboratory door open?"

Sandra nodded but she was still preoccupied with the bust. She lit another match and motioned Julie to lean closer. "Could this have been used as a model, Julie?"

Julie's eyes widened. "As a model for the wax figure in the coffin? I don't know why not."

"If it really were wax," Sandra reminded her cautiously.

As the face stared up at them with sightless eyes she felt again the unutterable blankness with which she had first looked into the great silver coffin. But it took Julie to express that feeling. "It looks so dead." Julie's tone was somber. "Somehow the more I stare at it the less I can feel that Jim may be alive somewhere."

Sandra didn't speak until they were back in Jim's room and she had disposed of the charred match ends. Her face was flushed and determined. "He is alive," she asserted. "We've got to believe it. And now we know the way is clear to make sure. Now listen here. Go to bed and get some sleep if you can. But be ready for me some time between two and three in the morning. That's when most people sleep the soundest.

I don't believe they'll try to lock your door again tonight. But make certain. Lock both the doors yourself and take the keys out. I'll tap just twice on your bedroom door. Have you a flashlight?"

Julie was dubious. "Somewhere. I'll look for it."

"Matches will do. Trot along now. I think I'll go down and visit with Mark for awhile."

Julie's face whitened. "Courageous of you, but I couldn't see him tonight. Maybe by tomorrow I'll have as good a mask as he has. Maybe by tomorrow all the masks will be off." She gripped Sandra's shoulders, and her voice dropped to a whisper. "Do you realize that Jim may be within twenty feet of us right now?"

Sandra came slowly into the library. "Julie's gone to bed but I'm not sleepy yet." She didn't mention that before joining him she had taken a long walk to steady herself after that talk with Julie.

He sprang up and pulled another chair toward the fire, but she didn't sit down immediately. She paused in front of the mantel mirror and looked into it with some vexation. A soft bronze tendril had sprung from the massed curls on top of her head and was waving airily around the nape of her neck. She gave it a savage twist. "No use talking, the gals of today simply don't know how to do their hair up decently. I'll have to cut it again."

He grinned. "My grandmother used to call them scolding locks."

She laid an arm along the mantel. "May I scold, then?"

"I'm listening."

"Why don't you send Julie away for a change somewhere?

Don't misunderstand, Mark," Sandra added hastily, "I'm not butting in again. In fact, I'm beginning to believe you were right about this Ronald Manning business, though it annoys me to admit it."

His face lighted. "Thanks. Has Julie given any indication she's getting over it?"

"Sometimes I think so." Sandra weighed her words carefully. "Of course she's very young and all youngsters hate to admit their mistakes. She'll probably feel she should be a bit cool with you for a while. Just the same I think she's secretly glad you've made the decision for her. But she does need a change. A household in mourning is too gloomy an atmosphere for anyone of her temperament."

"What sort of temperament would you say she had?"

Sandra shrugged. "Excitable, impulsive, obstinate. But very lovable."

He said, "Yes, she is. Perhaps I can arrange to take her on a trip soon, but I simply can't get away just now."

"Surely there's someone else, some older woman or some married friend of yours who'd be glad to take her on for a while?"

"I prefer her to be with me."

Sandra's lips tightened. "Well, you're her guardian. But don't forget that if you keep her tied to you too tightly in these years she's apt to fly away permanently once she's of age."

His gray eyes swept her briefly. "Nearly four years until then. Who knows what can happen in four years?"

Sandra pretended to stifle a yawn. "True enough," and turned toward the door. He followed her and caught at her hand.

"You're not going already? I thought a while ago that we were beginning to know each other. But the last day or so you've turned confoundedly elusive again. Sometimes I'd give a mint to know what's going on behind those yellow eyes of yours."

"It wasn't your fault if you didn't find out last night," Sandra said. But instantly regretting that implication, added with an amused grimace, "and my eyes aren't yellow. They're a beautiful amber. I decided that very firmly when I was twelve, so don't disillusion me."

He laughed too, and released her hand.

Upstairs again, the hours crept by slowly. She didn't dare try to take a nap because she was so tired that the alarm clock might not waken her this time. So she shampooed her hair, manicured her nails and then tried to settle down to a magazine. But as she turned each page she was listening to the last sounds of a house settling into repose. Finally she looked at her watch again. Quarter past two. Too early? But she decided to go.

She opened her door quietly. The corridor was empty and she slipped across it quickly to Julie's bedroom and tried the door knob. Good. Julie had taken her advice and had locked the door. She gave two quick light taps on the panel. There was no answer. For a second she hesitated. Julie was young to keep such late hours. Had she finally fallen asleep? Yet somehow with the remembrance of a moment when Julie's eyes and mouth had been grim and disillusioned, she couldn't credit it. She knocked again. Still no reply. She didn't dare rap any louder. As it was, the sounds had seemed to echo down the great hall like hammer strokes. So she knelt and put her lips to the keyhole.

"Julie!" The room beyond remained silent as a grave. Her hand brushed down the door in despair, and suddenly met an obstruction. The hall was so dark that she had only seen the outlines of the door, but now her fingers knew what she had touched. She gasped. About two feet from the floor a small padlock had been placed where it was least conspicuous. Sandra rose to her feet, her mouth stern, and tiptoed down the hall. Yes, there was a padlock on the door of Julie's sitting-room too. Why hadn't Julie roused the house when she had found she was locked in again? No, she wouldn't have done that after Sandra's warning. She had probably just gone philosophically to sleep. Sensible of her.

But there was no reason why she, Sandra, should give up the attempt too. This was as good a time as any. And after this padlock business there was no telling what Mark's next move might be. Impossible after tonight for either Julie or Sandra to pretend innocence and acquiescence. Without giving herself time enough to lose courage, she slipped down the hall and into Jim's room. The chill of its unused air made her shiver but she opened the closet resolutely enough and pushed against the further door. It resisted. In the hours between her good-night to Mark and the present moment the door had been locked from the other side.

Her first disappointment gave way to sheer fright. What if Mark were listening on the other side of the door right now? Or, almost worse, that bearded henchman of his whom she had seen so briefly? No, it was simpler than that and she could breathe freely after all. When Mark had heard them talking about Jim's albums he had remembered this door. He'd found the key under the matting and probably hadn't thought any more of the matter. How about the bronze bust? Had he

thought of that? Probably not. And in any event he had no reason to suppose that the statuary would suggest anything to Sandra even if she had seen it.

She hardly knew how she got back to her room. Though she had been so tired before, all sleep had left her now. But she undressed and lay there in the dark. She told herself sternly that this was the traditional time of the night or morning for morbid imaginings. No use, her mind persisted in picturing an octopus somewhere out there in the darkness, one of its long arms slowly uncoiling down the corridor, upraised to break in her door.

Even as she unwillingly visualized this fantastic horror there came a sharp tattoo on the door. Sandra stifled a shriek and lay there for a moment motionless, her scalp prickling. The sound came again, more peremptorily. Finally she found her voice.

"Who is it?" she called huskily.

"It's I, Mark." His voice had a strange harsh note in it. "Will you please dress and come out as quickly as possible?"

Sandra swung herself upright to the edge of her bed and her throat was constricted. "Has anything happened?"

"Yes. I'll wait here for you."

How she dressed as quickly as she did Sandra could never afterward remember, for her fingers shook and were moist with perspiration. But as she opened the door she flung her head up. The corridor lights were blazing fully now. Mark was leaning against the wall and his color had so ebbed that his usual tan had become ivory.

He looked at her and his eyes were vacant wells.

"Sandra," he said, "you have a great deal of courage and you'll need it. Julie has met with a terrible accident."

"How terrible?" Sandra's voice was a mere whisper.

"She is dead."

Sandra pressed her hand against her mouth until the imprints of teeth left their mark. "How did it happen?" He was watching her closely and she dropped her eyes before that haggard face.

"Apparently she tried to climb from the balcony outside her bedroom window by means of a sheet rope. The rope broke. The terrace underneath the window is stone."

Sandra swung on him with passionate eyes. This was all a nightmare, a dream of horror. What did it matter what she said?

"You devil," she sobbed, "you killed her!" In a single motion Mark had gripped her wrist and bent over her.

"Just what do you mean by that?" The words were measured. Perhaps the pain in her wrist brought her to herself. The dream broke. This was real. In another moment she might have thrown away forever any chance of saving Jim.

"I meant what I said," she stammered. "You locked her doors. If you hadn't, she wouldn't have tried this."

He released her wrist and his answer was somber. "Maybe I was to blame," he said dully. "I only meant to keep her from running away wtih Manning. I had reason to think they were planning an elopement."

And that's a lie, Sandra said to herself viciously. You know very well, Mark, that you'd fixed it so Manning wouldn't dare go near Julie again. The force of her under-thoughts made her break into hysterical laughter. "Wise of you! So much better for Julie to be killed than to elope!" Then she steadied herself. "May I see her?"

"No. We're waiting for the doctor. In such cases there are

formalities. But you can go to her room now and see how it happened."

Sandra could hardly drag herself there, but greater than her shrinking was her responsibility for confirming his story. The room was strewn with clothes and lingerie as though Julie had packed a suitcase hurriedly.

Mark said, "She threw her suitcase down first. It's still there, smashed open of course."

Sandra stepped out on the little iron balcony. Around two of the supports a sheet had been roughly but securely tied and it still stirred in the early morning wind. She leaned over the railing. The gray false-dawn made the terrace visible. A dark, shapeless object lay there. Near it was the twisted line of the second sheet which had unknotted from its mate and at a little distance the suitcase spilled its contents on the stone.

So it was true. True that while she had been imagining Julie heart and soul with her in their common venture, Julie was planning to slip away to Manning. No, she couldn't believe it. Even if Julie hadn't chosen to tell her of the elopement plans she would in common decency have made some excuse to postpone the night foray into the laboratory. And she hadn't tried to postpone it. She had showed the greatest enthusiasm.

"Here's the doctor now," Mark said and his voice had regained its customary control. "I'll have him leave you a bromide if you want. Or perhaps you'd rather sit out the rest of the night with me."

Sandra watched the dimmed lights of a car swing up the drive and come to a pause before the steps leading to the terrace. "I want to go downstairs," she said. "I want to hear what he says. I want to do what I can for Julie."

"Marta will take care of that." He was quiet. "You'd be better off to sleep. Or cry."

"I want to go down."

He threw out his hands and followed her silently down the stairs. But she had seen his face. In spite of the judgment in which she held him she felt a queer, brief pity. Here was a man with personality, brilliance, everything. A Lucifer, a fallen angel. A man whose eyes were intelligent enough to see the pit which his own hands had dug. He hadn't been able to conceal his indifference to Jim's fate, whatever it had been, but now his suffering face testified that he had made a terrible discovery. He had discovered that he had killed something he loved.

They went out on the terrace. Marta stood with folded arms beside that little crumpled heap; Becket at a respectful distance away. There were no others of the household. Evidently the rest of the staff was still asleep, ignorant of the tragedy. Sandra moved a step toward Marta. That stony face as usual registered nothing.

"Is she disfigured, Marta?" Those lovely, long-lashed eyes . . .

"No, ma'am. It—her neck was broken." Sandra swayed. Then she straightened and moved away, for Mark had met the doctor and two other men in uniform. The four were walking toward Marta, their voices hushed to the silence of the early morning and their task. Sandra walked to where the suitcase lay and looked at it, at first with unseeing eyes. Then she deliberately tried to concentrate on it. She must think of something definite and inanimate, or go to pieces. For a few moments she wouldn't admit anything at all to her mind except what was right under her eyes.

Two dresses, step-ins, brassieres, slips, toilet articles, pajamas. Slips? That's odd, she thought. Julie had scorned them in favor of brief, insouciant little petticoats. Yet here was Julie cramming several slips into an already over-crowded suitcase. And that object at Sandra's feet was the remains of a cold-cream jar. Sandra bent, then straightened up with excitement. She'd know that jar anywhere. It was her own! Julie had borrowed it several times, and it was incredible that she would have coolly planned to take away something which she knew had belonged to Sandra's mother.

Sandra felt a vague relief. Under all her grief and horror at the accident, had run a sick sense of disappointment that Julie should have let her down at the moment when she had most trusted her. The suitcase was eloquent proof to the contrary. However Julie had died, it wasn't because she was trying to elope. Someone had wanted it to look that way. Someone else had packed the suitcase, Mark, of course. Marta would have known better than to put in the slips or the jar.

"Perhaps you'd better go in now," Mark said suddenly at her elbow. "They are going to take her away for a few hours."

"Is there going to be an inquest?"

"The doctor I called is the coroner," he said. "Now that he's made his examination there won't be any more formalities of that sort. Please go inside somewhere. You must."

She stepped through the french doors into the library and closed them behind her. She felt sick and nauseated, but she set her teeth firmly into her lips as she sat down in an armchair in a far dim corner. Jim—she must remember Jim. Now more than ever she clung to the thought of him. She must find him. But oh God, poor Julie, poor youngster who had never known any real life outside this hateful place . . .

Suddenly she was leaning forward, staring through the window. Perhaps only from this odd angle of the room could she have seen that shadow silhouetted against a tree far down the driveway, the shadow of a huge bearded man—waiting. His patience, his immobility were terrifying, as though in his stillness he concentrated and symbolized all the horror that had culminated in these last hours.

Sandra opened her lips on a scream that was never uttered. Instead, her head fell back against the chair. Her hands clenched spasmodically and then lay quiet, unfolded.

8

WHEN SHE OPENED HER EYES full daylight was in the room. Sandra rose listlessly and moved toward a window. The sky was a somber mother-of-pearl that augured rain. She stared at it, empty of emotion. Her head was clear with that fragile clearness that sometimes follows a long illness. She felt tranquil, lethargic, almost indifferent. Her thoughts, if they could be called that, still ran automatically along the channels dug for them in the last few days, but it was a mechanical flow. She was reviewing events as academically as though she were turning the pages of some historical episode which had lost the flesh and blood of reality.

Had she actually fainted? And why? The bearded man didn't even raise any echo of fright in her mind now. She glanced at her watch. Nearly seven. The servants would be stirring quietly in the kitchen. Mark probably thought she had gone to her room, but he might be coming in any moment now. A few scattered drops of rain touched the window. If she were going out on the terrace again, it had better be at once.

The flagged stones beneath her feet were slippery with dew and the first drift of misty rain. From the terrace dipped a stretch of lawn toward the stables and garage, but beyond that she could see the black ridge of the seemingly endless forest. A day or two ago that forest had been green-gold, brimming with the first wine of spring. Now it lay inert,

seemingly frozen again into its winter immobility. She looked about her.

That crumpled, pathetic object was gone of course, but as yet no one had touched the rest of the disorder. The sheet, the scattered clothing, the broken suitcase still lay there. Since the coroner was satisfied—Sandra's mouth set tightly—there could be no possible objection to her handling anything.

She retrieved the silver top of her cold-cream jar for she had so pitifully few mementos of her mother. Then she turned back into the house. There was nothing more that she could do here. At her bedroom door she hesitated. Such a terrible silence from those rooms across the way. She saw that the padlocks had been removed, but she was apathetic to the fact. She entered her room and sat down in the chair by the window. She tried to shut her ears against the sound of a car in the driveway, against the subdued shuffling tramp of several pairs of feet down the corridor.

A half hour later Mark knocked and came in at her call. "You haven't been asleep at all?" he asked reproachfully.

She shook her head. "I had a nap in the library, and I'm going to go to bed in a moment, now those—those men have gone." She pushed her tumbled hair back from her forehead drearily.

"She looks very lovely now. Wouldn't you like to see her?"

"No, I can't. I don't want to."

"Yes." His composed expression didn't change as he took her hands and drew her from the chair, urged her gently across the hall. Through the further door she could see Julie's great luxurious bed, raised on its shallow platform. But its cover was ivory white now. At a little distance sat Marta, pa-

tiently and to the end a guardian. Sandra walked forward and mounted the step beside the bed. For a long moment she looked at the exquisite young face pillowed in satin, at the soft hair, at the eyes forever curtained. This was no mockery, this was reality. This was Julie. She looked like a child who slept, cherished and secure.

A ghastly, terrible sob wrenched itself suddenly from Sandra's throat. She put a hand to her mouth, struggled, but could not resist that relentless pressure. Sitting down on the step and with her face buried in her hands she cried. For the first time in weeks she cried and it seemed that some frantic and endless fountain was behind her tears. Useless to fight against it.

It was many minutes later that she raised a swollen, distorted face and stumbled across the room. Dimly she was aware that Marta's chair had not ceased its quiet, regular rocking, that Mark hadn't stirred from his position of watchfulness. It didn't matter. Let them eye each other, let them force her here to see the finality of death, to work on her fears —none of it mattered. They couldn't know that the tears themselves had brought their own relief.

Mark took her to the door of her room—she was half blinded—and his voice was very low. "Do you want a bromide or will you sleep now?"

"I shall sleep."

"No need for you to get up 'til you want to. Ring for your trays."

"Thank you," dully.

His laugh was short. "Don't thank me. There's been enough trouble in this house. We don't want to have you fall ill."

The words did not strike Sandra as ambiguous until many hours later.

The rain had settled to a steady downpour when Sandra awoke early in the afternoon. Perhaps the lashing torrent against her windows had finally awakened her. She yawned, stretched comfortably, and knew by the rested serenity of her body that she had slept well and dreamlessly. She knew too from the sadness that hung over but did not blur her thoughts that her mind had recovered its delicate balance between a frenzied tenseness and an unnatural indifference. She realized, shamefacedly, that she was actually hungry.

She rang for a tray. She felt immensely refreshed, and when Angela returned she allowed her to hover over the arrangement of the food on the little table.

"Oh, miss, she was so sweet that we've all cried terribly. It's a lesson to me, it is, that no man's worth it." This rather obscure observation seemed to satisfy her, for she repeated it. "No man's worth it, and Cook and I could have told the poor lamb, not that it would have been our place, and even out in this lonesome hole appearances and manners have to be kept up or we would get fired very quick by Mr. Caldwell who is a gentlemen but leans to the strict side with the staff I often think." She stopped from sheer lack of breath and Sandra unfolded her napkin.

"Marta seems to have plenty of privileges," she smiled. Angela looked shocked.

"Oh, but miss, she's almost one of the family, if you won't be offended at my saying so. She's been here since before Miss Julie was born. Cook says it's rather aristocratic having an old nurse, though I never saw one except in a book but it

seems a bit uncomfortable at times. At least it was to Miss Julie who could only relieve herself by throwing something once in a while. There, I'm sure I didn't mean to say any harm of the poor young lady."

"I'm sure you didn't, Angela. Well, I guess there's nothing else, unless you'd like to bring me the paper." Sandra's look was quite firm and Angela reluctantly withdrew.

Sandra disposed of the fruit cocktail, the creamed mushrooms and toast, and drank two cups of coffee. Then she pushed the table aside and curled up in her chair with a cigarette. It was time to consider quite a few things calmly.

In the first place, she might accept as proved the fact that Julie had not been trying to elope. The cold-cream jar and the slips settled that point for Sandra, however fragile the same evidence might seem to a male mind. Then it followed that her neck had been broken, either in her own room or somewhere else.

It could hardly have been an accident if it had happened in her own room. One might break an ankle or an arm in slipping on the floor but it would be very unusual for a young girl of Julie's suppleness to break her neck in such a way. And if it had happened there why should the stage have been set to suggest another theory? And wouldn't she, Sandra, who was not far away, and was wide awake, have heard some outcry?

She had settled two points to her satisfaction. Julie had not attempted an elopement and she had died neither in her own room nor on the terrace. Then what? Had they taken her somewhere, killed her, and brought her down to the terrace? It seemed a cumbersome form of murder at best. A drug, a slow poison . . . Sandra sat upright in bed. No, they couldn't

do that. They had chosen this awkward death because it alone would be possible to mask as an accident! There was shrewdness for you, avoiding all question of mysterious illness, of autopsies. Mark was a chemist of scientific repute. Would he choose a death that could be traced directly to him? She struck her hands together. They had been clever, clever!

Then she thought of padlocks. Marta or Becket must have placed them sometime during the evening while she was with Mark. Sandra grew thoughtful. Was it possible that Julie had heard those tiny scrapings at her door? She tried to construct a possible theory.

Perhaps Julie had heard the noise after she, Sandra, had gone downstairs. Perhaps she had silently stolen through into the other room, slipped out, locked the door and made her get-away before the second padlock had been placed. Sandra was not quite satisfied with the explanation. The hall was dim, to be sure, but both Julie's doors faced on the corridor and it seemed hardly possible that the amateur carpenter should not have seen her flit away. To be sure, he would have been kneeling awkwardly on the floor and very much absorbed in a task which demanded as little noise as possible. . . .

Well, it was as good a theory as any. The possibility that Marta or Becket had simply lured the girl from her room by some glib story and then placed the padlocks as a blind seemed even less plausible. For Julie had been feeling far from kindly toward either of them when she had gone to her room.

To adopt her first idea for a time, what had Julie done then, after escaping from her room? She had probably first hidden herself in Sandra's room. Then growing bored, she

had thought of investigating for herself the closet in Jim's room. Sandra felt a chill, but she followed her train of reasoning steadily. That door, which she herself had found locked after her talk with Mark that evening, may have been open when Julie found it. The child had actually gone into the laboratory and had been discovered! That was why the closet door was now locked!

Beyond that laboratory door Sandra's theories could not take her. A curtain hung before her there, impenetrable but painted with the fantastic colors of her fear and horror.

Then she straightened up. Well, the worst had happened to Julie. She could avenge her, but no longer fear for her. But there was still the possibility that Jim was alive, a very faint one now, with her knowledge of what had just happened. If she could only be sure of her theories, sure enough to consult the police, or at least to consult a cleverer intellect than her own.

How about the Senator, Mark's brother? Was he in the conspiracy too, or was he, as Jim had hinted, a good fellow but only too willing to see as little as possible? If he were totally ignorant of his brother's activities then she had a chance to persuade him. But if he were merely purposely blind she would do well to tread carefully. At any rate, she would doubtless see him tonight or tomorrow, for Washington by plane was not far away. After talking with him she could decide what definite step to take in informing the authorities.

If she could only know about Jim! Just a glimpse of him alive, just a word or sign from him and she would have the courage of a lion and the resource of a fox. If she could only get into the laboratory! Hadn't Mark said he would be in

town during the day making funeral arrangements? Then there was just a bare possibility that she could do some reconnoitering before he returned.

With decision Sandra threw off her negligée and dressed in a warm tweed suit and heavy boots. A little felt hat crushed down over her eyes would be some protection against the driving rain. She pulled on her gloves and left the room.

Becket merely bowed as he swung open the heavy doors of the vestibule and assisted her down the first step. The doors clanged to immediately, but Sandra wondered if there were eyes which followed her progress. When a curve of the drive took her out of sight of the house she cut across the rolling lawns and far to the north of the house so that she might approach it from the back from its western exposure.

These were the farm lands of the estate which she traversed, and her shoes were soon caked with mud. But she plodded along holding her face up to the pelting of the rain, while her eyes planned the course of her approach to the house. In another ten minutes she stood beside the brook which acted as a miniature moat for the laboratory wing. Of course she was perfectly visible to anyone who might be watching for her, but she had nevertheless given a fair imitation of one who had completed with satisfaction a few minutes of exercise and who has very naturally explored a bit in doing so.

The brook was turbulent today and as black as ink save where the lines of rain plowed furrows of light in its depths. Sandra had been watching it with such fascination that it was not until she stepped back a pace that she noted an odd fact. The ground around her was strewn with glass, thick, opaque glass with ugly jagged edges. The pieces were mostly large as

though the material had not shattered easily, and some of them were exactly square.

She studied one of the pieces intently, then her brow cleared. Of course. It was the glass of a skylight. Someone had swept the broken fragments from the flat roof of the laboratory, and that sweeping motion had caused them to describe an arc and land on the far side of the brook.

Excitement was rising high in Sandra now, a healthy excitement. Almost forgetting the necessity for caution she stepped back and studied the wing with care.

It had been an addition made by Mark she knew, the flat roof being only a few feet below the third story windows. Could Julie have thought of that way into the laboratory? Had she tried to break the glass or had she fallen through it? Or perhaps, she had tried to escape from the laboratory through it.

Steadying herself to a reasonable pace that would not cause comment, Sandra rounded the stables and rang the front door bell. She took off her outer things, laying them in Becket's reverent hands to be dried downstairs, and then ran up the steps. In her room she paused long enough to slip on a pair of dry shoes. Though it was still only the middle of the afternoon the grayness of the day promised an early twilight. Mark would return soon. In the meantime, this dull gloom was very opportune for her purpose.

The third floor was devoted entirely to the help's quarters. If she ran into any of them she could simply plead ignorance of the house, or a desire to explore. But she knew that in spite of the recreation room which had been fitted for them on that floor, they all tended to gather during their free hours in the kitchen.

She mounted to the third floor. The house was so uniformly rectangular, save for the wing, that she had no difficulty in finding her way down the hall toward the west. At the end of the corridor she found two windows. Breathlessly Sandra listened. There was not a sound from any of the rooms on this floor.

She pushed open one of the windows and glanced out. About two feet below her was the flat roof of the laboratory, and there, discernible in its whole area, was the rectangle of the skylight. Its glass was broken over an area about three feet square. Without allowing herself to consider the matter further, she swung herself out of the window and found the firm roof beneath her feet. Then she approached the skylight.

The room beneath was dark and at first Sandra could distinguish nothing. Then as she knelt down and peered over the edge she could see a portion of a large divan. It must be getting beautifully soaked at the moment, she reflected. There was no sound in her ears but the steady hum of the rain on the roof. Dared she call? No. If Jim were there they would never leave him alone unless he were unconscious or gagged. So that would do no good, whatever his situation.

She looked so long and so intently that she almost swayed toward the brink in the fascination that height sometimes compels. Could she get into the room? She could only do it by jumping, for the sides of the skylight were so jagged with glass that she could not swing from them. But the divan, soaked or not, was providential. She would count ten; at the end of that count she would jump.

". . . eight, nine." She jumped.

For a moment she sprawled inelegantly on the couch, then

she hastily removed herself from its damp surface. She had no sooner stood up than she felt her arms being gripped tightly by someone who had moved from the shadows behind her. She hardly needed to look up. Mark again, she thought resignedly.

9

"You drop like the gentle rain from heaven," he said. "It's rather fortunate for you that the couch, rather than the floor, was 'the place beneath'. Well, no comments?"

Sandra's voice was sullen. "You can let go my arms."

"Not at all, not until I can guide you to a spot where you can catch your breath."

"I'll go to my own room."

"Oh, no. Anyone who is sufficiently interested to drop through a skylight in order to visit me, mustn't leave so abruptly. Or is it your practice on rainy days to jump through skylights for your necessary exercise?"

"I hate and despise you." Sandra's voice was dispassionate. "The joke has gone quite far enough."

"I agree with you absolutely. We'll talk it over in the other little room. It's getting so dark now I can hardly see your face."

"I believe," observed Sandra, "that I am about to scream rather loudly."

Mark's tone was filled with innocent pleasure, though she felt him release one arm and touch something beside him.

"Do, my dear, do." And before she could speak, a hideous volume of sound rolled down the great room, a dynamic radio speaker which could be heard at its full strength half a mile across the fields.

"Would you like to imitate the static?" he added cordially.

—AND THE NEXT NUMBER ON OUR PROGRAM—

Sandra's ears reverberated and rang with the crazy din which seemed to echo back to her from every wall and from the hills beyond. What was the use? Until she was absolutely forced to show all her cards her common sense must rescue what it could from the debacle. She had made a wild throw—and lost. Now she must steady herself back on the tracks of caution which she should never have left. Her voice was quiet so that the man had to bend to catch her words.

"We will go wherever you say."

"Right. I knew we would but it's always pleasanter if there is unanimous agreement." Then with the swiftness that characterized many of his actions he whirled her around several times. When his hands steadied her again her head was dizzy and her eyes had lost all sense of direction. But she made no comment and suffered him to keep his hold upon her as he led her across a pitchdark space.

The next few minutes were among the weirdest that Sandra had so far experienced. The dark afternoon had closed in quickly, and when they had moved out of the radius of the skylight bulky shadows only confused her straining eyes. Then they paused and she felt the grip on her arm slightly relaxed. The man's voice broke the silence that had fallen between them.

"I shall have to blindfold you lightly now, I'm afraid," his voice was apologetic, "as we are going to pass through a room which at the moment holds some of my business secrets. It will only be for a moment." Sandra submitted to the handkerchief which Mark's hands managed to place securely over her eyes even in this darkness. At least his touch was impersonal, though she shivered a little as the tips of his fingers brushed her cold cheeks. She did not even resist when he

clasped both her hands in one of his behind her back, and propelled her gently forward.

This passage over thick luxuriant rugs was the most trying. Silent as was the surrounding space, she had a conviction that they were not alone, that eyes were observing their progress. Were one pair of those eyes Jim's, impotently imploring? That would be the last irony.

Through two more doors she was led, doors that closed silently behind her. Presently they were descending some stairs. Then she was seated on a couch and Mark had removed the bandage. The darkness was still absolute, yet she was grateful for the relief from that pressure.

"I'll turn on the lights shortly," Mark was saying, "but perhaps we could come to a better understanding as we are. Think of me as a voice, just a voice which is going to ask you some simple questions, and intends to have them answered. In the first place, why under heaven did you jump through that skylight? I had been watching you for some minutes, but I couldn't believe that you were actually going to attempt it. Well?"

Sandra waited deliberately, until she could control her thoughts and her voice. He could never afford to let her go free once he knew the actual extent of her discoveries. Perhaps a half truth would be the safest.

Her voice held a convincing tone of mixed shame and defiance. "What I did wasn't out of sheer curiosity. I was strolling around the place, trying to get some of the cobwebs out of my mind, when I saw a man going across the bridge to the door of the laboratory."

"Ah!"

"Yes, a bearded man. Naturally I was surprised because I

knew that no one went in there except you and Becket. Just as he got to the door he glanced around. I didn't want him to see me watching so I ducked behind the old plow that's standing out there in the field." Sandra's wits were working frantically, but she felt rather proud of herself for remembering that old plow.

"Go on."

"When I looked out again he was gone, but whether through the little door or away from the house, I didn't know. Anyway, I was a bit upset. I thought you were still in town, and I decided to tell Becket what I had seen."

"Go on."

"But when I walked right up to the brook I saw a lot of glass around, evidently glass from a skylight. So I thought I'd look out the third story windows and get a little more data before I reported to Becket. You know the rest. I saw the skylight was really broken and I took a chance that I could catch whoever it was."

Sandra faltered, seeing the wide gaps in her explanation.

"Rather foolhardy, weren't you, jumping unarmed into a dark room after a possible burglar?" Mark's voice was very dry.

"I judge from your being here that it was you I saw after all," she muttered. "I was at such a distance that a turned up collar could have looked like a beard."

"It was I." The response was a little too quick she noted, and felt a little thrill of triumph. Then the bearded man did have free access to the laboratory, and that part of her story had passed muster for a time. How long before Mark would find it false she was too excited and weary to care. She slumped a little on the couch.

"It's been a frightful day," her voice was half a whisper. "Do you think you can forgive me and let me go to my room?" Mark's hand tightened on her arm.

"It's been a bad day for me, too," he said grimly. "This is the first peaceful moment I have had."

"You call this peaceful?"

"It's at least interesting to sit in this darkness and silence, and debate whether or not to take toll from a very pretty invader." Sandra held her breath.

"I'm going to kiss you, and for that kiss you can go free for a time. After all, your story is a bit thin in parts, isn't it?"

Her mind was a welter of confusion. This was something completely out of character with the ascetic ruthlessness that had seemed to be Mark's outstanding trait.

"You wouldn't try to humiliate me on this day when Julie has just died. There are decencies."

"Are there?" His tone was tired and sardonic. "I've forgotten. There has been so much death, and so much tragedy. But you, Sandra, you are going out into the world very soon with your little pockets properly lined, and your pretty eyes on the lookout for more prospects. Somehow I don't think your lips will remember very long."

He turned suddenly and she found herself in the grip of his arms, felt her head bend back under the pressure of his lips. They touched her hair, her cheek, her neck. It was the first time that Sandra had been so possessed, and she knew that he had lied. Never so long as she lived could she forget this hateful ardency, this rape of her senses while her mind remained stone-cold.

Just as suddenly she was released. Half crouched as she was she heard Mark's footsteps stumble across the room, heard a

door open and close, a key click in the lock. He was gone and she remained here a prisoner.

Her first sensation was of burning anger rather than fright. He wasn't even a villain on a grand scale, she thought contemptuously, he was a common cheat, breaking his own hasty promise. That feeling of healthy wrath gave her strength to put away momentarily her humiliation. Her hands felt along the couch and came into contact with a handkerchief, a woman's handkerchief.

It was not hers, she knew instantly, for it was weighted with a two inch fall of delicate lace. It was Julie's, one of her cocktail handkerchiefs. Sandra's lips set in vindictive triumph. At least she knew now that she had been right. Julie had been in this laboratory wing, had been a prisoner as she now was. It was not a comfortable thought.

Thrusting the handkerchief into her sleeve, she moved along in her search about the room, strung up by the urgency of her danger. Her questing hands touched a table, a desk rather, as she noted its heavy construction. There was nothing on its surface but a lamp. Obviously there would be no current or bulb, but at any rate it was worth trying. She searched up its base for the button, and pushed it tentatively. To her surprise, light sprang beneath the amber shade.

Sandra's eyes had been so long in darkness that she had to rub them before they ceased to blink against even this dim glow. Then she looked about her excitedly. It was some moments before she could grasp the ludicrous fact with which she was confronted. She was standing in her own room. Sandra was in two minds whether to laugh or rage Mark must feel for the time being amply revenged. He had made her pay for her freedom, to be sure, but he had never intended

to do more than frighten her in any case. Yet she was very thoughtful. Just what had the last half hour meant?

Was Mark really infatuated with her and consequently lenient about her escapade, or had he simply chosen the most humiliating and contemptuous method of forcing her to leave the house? Sandra inclined to the latter view. She sat very still in front of her mirror, noting the flush that still stained her cheeks where his lips had been pressed. Well, she thought grimly, he had over-shot his target this time. It only needed this latest action to complete the fierceness of her hatred.

Hatred? Something inside her winced away from the word but she gripped its shoulders and hauled it back. So that's it, my girl! You've fallen for Mark! You've been teetering on the brink for days and his kiss finished you. He planned it that way. Face it. Miss Sandra Marshall, *summa cum laude*, is in the grip of a tuppenny infatuation for a murderer. Remember, even if Jim's alive, Julie is not. And what are you doing about the whole thing? About Jim particularly? I'll tell you. You are sitting with your lips agape and soft, remembering Mark's kiss. Don't tell me there's nothing you can do. You can at least try to follow up the one small clue that's definite.

Sandra walked across the room and picked up the small local book that lay beside the large metropolitan directory of Boston. In the neighboring town that catered to the immediate needs of Reed's Crossing, there were but three Haskells. Her forefinger paused beside one, "Haskell, Casper G., mortician." Of course. Naturally. Any fool would have thought of this long ago. So there had been a hoax, definitely! And now at this late date Casper G. was getting cold feet about the

whole thing. Casper G. had felt that the only way those cold feet could be warmed was by another application of greenbacks. But Casper G. had been smartly smacked down by Mark, who wasn't having any. Mark had bluffed him, and Mark had dragged in the Senator to help with that bluff. Then was the Senator in the conspiracy too, or did Mark hold something over his own brother's head with which to browbeat him to his will?

But Haskell couldn't have secured a burial permit without a death certificate. Sandra's forefinger moved busily again. Two doctors . . .

Half an hour later she was sitting in a shabby waiting room in the town of Belsford, eleven miles away. She was sitting none too hopefully, it was true. She had discovered through an apparently aimless conversation in the town drugstore that Dr. Reynolds had attended Jim's last illness. But it appeared that the whole town swore by Dr. Reynolds, and a physician didn't maintain that reputation for thirty years without foundation. When she was ushered into his office he was scrubbing his hands at the wash-stand, and she had an opportunity to study him a minute. Tall, thin, bald, overworked. The waiting room was still crowded and his supper hour fast slipping away, but he was patient.

"Yes?"

"I'm not ill, Dr. Reynolds. I just wanted to talk to you a moment about my husband. You attended him in his last illness—James Demarest."

The soap slipped from the doctor's hand but he didn't look down. Just continued drying his fingers. After a moment, "I shall be very glad to tell you what I can. I wasn't Jim's

regular physician but I have known him since he was a small boy."

"Did he suffer much?"

"There is usually suffering in pneumonia," Dr. Reynolds said carefully. "We eased him through as best we could."

"I'm sure you did. Forgive me, but how did it happen that his regular physician was not in charge?"

"On vacation." He dropped the hand towel and came forward. The keen eyes looked directly at her through heavy spectacles. "Jim wanted me, Mrs. Demarest. He asked for me. He used to go fishing with my son when they were youngsters. I assure you that everything was done for him in his last illness that could be done."

"I was sorry not to have seen one of his nurses," Sandra said apologetically, "then I needn't have bothered you."

Dr. Reynolds looked puzzled. "But didn't they tell you? Marta and Becket took over the nursing care. Far too much for them, of course, but Marta was a trained nurse before she entered service with the Caldwells. And Jim wanted her. A patient's ease of mind is important in pneumonia, and nursing care is half the battle."

"A battle that was lost," Sandra reminded him curtly and stood up. She felt unsure of herself again and almost sorry for a remark that had brought a flush to the doctor's face. "It just seems so strange," she mumbled, "that anyone as young and healthy as Jim should go so quickly."

He put a compassionate hand on her arm. "It's not easy to face these things and it sounds trite to say that sometimes they are for the best. My son, just Jim's age, is crippled with infantile. For a great many years I lay awake nights and damned 'the sorry scheme of things entire.' Yet now at least

I know where he is. At Warm Springs, cared for. Not lying under a French moon or washing, face down, off some Pacific Island."

Sandra bit her lip. "But you still have a hope, you see."

"Yes," he agreed gently. "I still have a hope. You have none." His words were as kind and final as the bandage on an amputated limb.

Sandra looked back at the doctor's decent yet somehow forlorn little house as she started down the street toward the car. It was hard not to believe in that man. In fact, it was impossible. Every tired, gentle line in his face was eloquent, just as the house itself was eloquent testimony to the fact that industry and idealism do not always bring financial rewards.

As she drove toward Willow Miles her first curiously flat feeling changed to a trembling doubt, and then to positive exhilaration. Why then, the whole thing was a nightmare, born of her own sick imaginings! If the doctor were to be trusted, her whole theory collapsed like a house of cards. Oh, there was tragedy still, the tragedy of Jim's death and Julie's, she reminded herself hurriedly. But they were clean tragedies. Her first and most important premise was that the figure in the coffin had been wax. Dr. Reynolds had convinced her to the contrary. Even Haskell wasn't necessarily Casper G., mortician. He could be contractor Haskell or lawyer Haskell or plumber Haskell. For that matter, her first impression that he was a Belsford native was probably wrong. He may have come from Timbucktoo, for all her real knowledge. As for Julie, well, it was odd that Julie had packed Sandra's jar in her suitcase, not to mention slips she never wore. On the other hand, Julie had been rushed and excited,

she had probably grabbed anything and everything in sight.

Sandra's spirits rose still higher, buoyed up by a still further elation that she did not dare to define. And when Mark met her in the hall that elation sparkled on her face as rosily as the rain drops had whipped her cheeks to color. "You're back," he said with relief. "I told them to stall dinner another half hour." He drew off her damp coat hesitantly, as though at any moment she might turn on him in fury. Mark was remembering that hour in the laboratory. For the first time he was unsure of himself, afraid of Sandra. Well, let him be unsure for a little time. Some instinct told her that this was an evanescent moment that would never come again. There would be better moments, but not quite like this—colored and dissolving as a rainbow.

She must have dimpled in spite of herself, for Mark caught her hand boldly now and stood looking down at her, puzzled.

"Becket said you were just shopping, but you look as though you'd heard good news."

"I have."

He was still more puzzled. "But you haven't even seen your afternoon mail. It's up in your room."

"Does good news always have to come by mail?" But the impudence in her smile trembled a little. She had always known academically that Mark was handsome. Now she didn't know whether he was or not, not with the electric pulse of his palm beating against hers. Some day in the future she'd be waiting idly in some railroad station and she'd see a tall man with a tanned skin and gray eyes and she'd think judicially, why, that's the handsomest man I ever saw. And then he'd turn and come to her and it would be Mark. But for one moment she would have seen him im-

personally again. She couldn't see him that way now, he was too close now.

Mark said in a low voice, "Do you realize I've held your hand two minutes by the clock and you haven't protested?"

She laughed. "Sorry. I was thinking of something absurd. Do you always time your handshakes, by the way?"

"You'd be surprised at what close data I have on certain hours and minutes."

"The scientific mind, I suppose."

"I'm not feeling scientific at the moment. Want me to describe my exact state?"

She shook her head and pulled her hand away, but so shyly that it was no repulse. Even Mark was an intruder on this moment, though he was the cause of it. She wasn't ready for words yet. Sixteen, she thought amusedly, I'll bet I'm not a day over sixteen this very minute. "Not time enough. I'm holding up dinner as it is." She added briskly, "I suppose your brother is arriving again some time tomorrow?"

"No," Mark said, "he simply can't make it. He's a pretty important figure in Washington right now, Sandra, and he has plenty of enemies. There's some fancy sniping due to burst out tomorrow."

Sandra said directly, "Do you really think he'll get the Court appointment?"

Mark flushed under his tan. "You sound a bit incredulous. Perhaps that's my fault. He and I don't always see alike on things and of course no prophet has honor in his own country. But he's had a worthy record and I realize it, even if I like to take him down now and then. Washington has a habit of breeding personal vanity and pompousness, but underneath all that he's sound enough." He added slowly,

"Yes, I think he'll get the appointment. A judge has to have a reputation like Caesar's wife, but even his worst enemies haven't been able to dig anything up. God knows, they've tried hard enough."

Sandra paused at the foot of the stairs and slapped her damp gloves against the rail. "Well, even if he doesn't make it this time, perhaps he will in the future."

Mark shook his head. "Not likely. Now with my work, with this experiment I'm trying to put through, for instance, —well, it'll be a blow if it doesn't pan out. But there are a thousand different springboards from which I can take off another time. It's different with Charles. This appointment would be the crown of his political life and there won't be a similar chance. If he can hold off the coyotes even a few days more, until he gets the appointment and is sworn in, he'll be safe. It isn't popular to take pot-shots at a presiding justice."

"From what you say about him, they wouldn't be very serious pot-shots anyway."

Mark looked down at the floor. "The least whisper could be serious right now," he said. Then he shrugged off whatever painful speculation had held him. "Shall I tell Becket you'll be down in twenty minutes?" His eyes held Sandra's. "Even that's too long," he said deliberately.

It would be less than twenty minutes Sandra thought, as she showered and dressed. For one thing, the face that shone back at her from the mirror didn't need any make-up beyond a smidgeon of powder. It was a little girl's face, shining and rosy. If Julie were only peering over her shoulder now, there could be no further happiness. She started to leave the room, then turned back to pick up her mail. Some circulars and

three letters. The two from Florida she skimmed through, then laid them aside to be read more thoroughly later.

Grandfather was stronger, that was the important thing. And he had seemed quite satisfied with the explanation that Sandra's temporary absence was due to the fact that the Mexican material must be classified. The doctor's brief note confirmed the nurse's more voluble letter.

The third letter was in a strange hand. She glanced at the signature and the paper shook a little in her fingers as she read:

My dear Mrs. Demarest:

We leave Devens tonight so if I'm to say anything at all, this is my last chance. When Mr. Caldwell explained why I should wait a few years before seeing Julie again, his reasons seemed good at the time and I accepted them. Now I'm not so sure and I'm frankly shifting the burden of doubt to you. I'm not breaking my promise of secrecy—only cracking it a little! If Mr. Caldwell had been less obvious in his suspicions of me in the role of fortune-hunter certain questions as to his own honesty might not have arisen in my mind, so I make no apologies on that score.

I am concerned for Julie's sake, but I know she trusts you. In all probability you are aware of the whole situation, as I, unfortunately, am not. If you are satisfied, forget this letter. If you are not satisfied, I can only suggest that the woods near the three hills on the estate might bear some reconnoitering. Since Mr. Caldwell didn't see fit—or didn't dare—to take me into his full confidence, I'm not breaking any promise when I say that it's most curious to see a trail of chimney smoke from a deserted portion of his estate. To see it three days in a row. You are Jim's wife and you have certain rights which I have not.

Please forgive me if my worries and suspicions are unfounded. And in any event, destroy this letter. I wish I could

send my love to Julie but I've got to keep that part of the bargain at least.

Sincerely,

RONALD MANNING

The bargain? What bargain? What had Mark offered Ronald if he would desert Julie? Well, it didn't matter. Money, probably. Everyone liked money. Money to bank against a return from the service, money to close the mouths of political enemies, money for Mexico. And yet, wasn't she again condemning Mark without sufficient reason? She herself hadn't been particularly impressed by Manning's integrity. This letter might merely represent the malicious venom of a disappointed man. She clung desperately to one hope: Dr. Reynolds was the keystone of the arch, letter or no letter.

Sandra crossed the room, lifted the receiver and dialed the telephone of the Belsford drugstore. Please don't let the doctor be crooked, not the doctor.

Her voice was a mere whisper into the mouthpiece, then she steadied it. "Garmon's Drugstore? Mr. Garmon? I'm calling you because I hate to ask Dr. Reynolds a question that might hurt him, and I thought perhaps you could help me. You see, I have a young cousin who's crippled with infantile and I'm thinking of sending her to Warm Springs. I'm just wondering, have you heard whether or not Dr. Reynolds' son has made any noticeable improvement since he's been there? Does the doctor say?"

The answer came warmly and pleasantly down the line. "Why, it's much too soon for anyone to say. The boy has only been there two weeks. He'd ought to have gone long ago but even with the discount, Doc couldn't swing it until now.

Doctor and druggists gets paid last, you know." The voice cackled. "But Doc got a break a while ago. Nice little legacy. You have your cousin go right ahead. I guess if Warm Springs is good enough for a President, it's good enough for your cousin, Miss—Miss—what did you say the name was?"

Sandra replaced the receiver. I didn't say. I didn't say, she murmured senselessly to herself. I'm not Sandra Marshall any more, and I lost the right a half hour ago to call myself Mrs. James Demarest. I betrayed Jim. I forgot him, thinking of Mark.

Just before she went downstairs she applied lipstick and rouge with a ruthless hand. She needed them now.

She paused in the shadows at the head of the stairs and looked down at Mark. There was a nervousness in his pacing. No, not nervousness; eagerness. For the first time since she had known him, he looked boyish, defenceless, as though he had finally shrugged off some armor. He came toward her quickly as she descended, then his smile faded. "Has the good news evaporated so quickly?" But his attempt at lightness was a failure. Sandra knew he had read her tight lips and shuttered eyes. Even then there was some faint hope in her. If Mark protested, if he asked questions. . . . But he didn't. They went to dinner in silence.

The meal wasn't as difficult as it might have been. Here in the heart of the house, Julie's death still hung like a pall as the dominant fact. To it one could ascribe the monosyllables, the untasted food, the averted eyes between two mourners. But after dinner, Mark stood up quickly as though to forestall her departure. "Please don't go yet, Sandra," he said, "I have some things to talk over with you, or rather to give you."

She looked at him steadily. "I can't imagine what you can have to give me."

"Come and see."

Sandra shrugged and preceded him into his study. He went toward the little safe that was set in the wall. Presently he had removed a large square box and was setting it beside her on the couch. Then opening it, he flung back the lid of the inner receptacle. Inside were a number of velvet jewel boxes, some of them rubbed and faded with age. One by one he opened them and set them out, while she watched in complete silence.

Here were such jewels as she had never seen. Old-fashioned topaz ear-rings of indescribable amber depths, diamond solitaires, sapphire and emerald dinner rings and rope after rope of exquisite pearls, a few of them yellowed with age. Sandra would have been less than a woman if her eyes had not sparkled, but still she made no comment. Then Mark spoke and she saw that he was ill at ease.

"These would have been Julie's if she had lived. They are yours now." Sandra was startled.

"Why mine?"

"Obviously because you are now the last woman in the family. You were Jim's wife."

The girl thought quickly. "Would Jim have inherited Julie's estate?"

"If she had died first, yes."

"Does that mean," Sandra asked, feeling her way carefully, "that I, as Jim's widow, inherit her estate?"

"No." Mark's voice was grave, but still he didn't meet her eyes. "It may sound a bit complicated but I'll explain it as simply as possible. If Jim died unmarried before he was

thirty, Julie was to inherit if she were living. If she were not, the estate was to go to certain endowments and charities which my sister specified. On the other hand, if Jim left a widow, the widow was to receive one-half the estate, and the other half was to be used for the same endowments.

"If Julie died unmarried before she was thirty, her estate was to go to Jim if he were living. If he were not, it would go to the same endowments as I have mentioned."

Sandra's brow was wrinkled.

"But if Julie were married?"

"Then it would go to her natural heir or heirs with no conditions."

"It's a bit confusing," Sandra admitted. "Who is going to benefit from the endowments?"

She saw a flush start under Mark's tanned skin.

"A New York church and a western university will benefit. There is also provision for a Chemical Foundation."

"Ah!" They eyed each other like two wary animals.

"And you, I suppose, are executor of this Foundation."

"One of them."

Sandra rose, not casting a glance at the jewelry which spilled such sparks into the room.

"Well," she yawned, "I suppose Mr. Davenport, when he comes, will explain this all a bit more clearly. In the meantime, I can't see why these things," she swept her arm indifferently behind her, "are mine."

"They would have gone to Jim's wife," Mark was stubborn. "I want you to take them now—do what you like with them. They are yours."

Sandra's lips curled icily. Here it is again, the bribe. I'll have plenty of money now, through Jim's inheritance, what-

ever twists and turns Mark tries to make. So he's doubling back on his tracks with jewelry. He's even willing to marry me if that will keep me quiet. That wouldn't be too difficult for him. He's in love with me whether he knows it or not. And even I, even now, God help me . . .

Her tone was prosaic enough as she changed the subject. "Is the funeral service at two or three tomorrow?"

"Three." But as she turned toward the door his hand went out uncertainly. "Sandra! What is it? What has changed you since you came in this afternoon?"

It was a satisfaction to press her breast against the dagger of her own emotion. "And how was I this afternoon?"

"You were sweet, like a little girl looking at a Christmas tree. . . ." His voice trailed. If it hadn't been Mark, you'd have thought there was an undertone of agony in his voice. But it was Mark.

"Are you by any chance speaking of that tender moment in the laboratory, when you called me a rather inept fortune-hunter?"

"You know I didn't mean that! Good Lord, I was so miserable about that. And then you came in later and seemed to have forgiven me." He cleared his throat shakily. "Listen, Sandra, when I think of what I said and did in the laboratory, I could cut my throat."

"Perhaps it would be a good idea if you did," Sandra agreed pleasantly. "After all, funerals go by threes, don't they?" She walked out, leaving him standing by the ignored array of jewels.

10

IT WAS TWO MORNINGS after the second funeral. The house had settled into a still deeper lethargy of death and vacancy, and Sandra wondered when she had lived through a grimmer period. Impossible for her to remain now. Julie's presence had been a thin enough barrier of propriety, and as for Marta, martinet that she was, her status as servant disqualified her for chaperon. For another few days the funeral would lend respectability to Sandra's stay, for scandal is anemic where death is recent. But could she endure those days even for Jim's sake? Endure that conflict of hatred and infatuation that roiled her mind during every encounter with Mark?

She beat her hands together and turned impatiently from the window of her room. The day was clear, free of the rain which had persisted throughout the funeral ceremonies, but her mind was still in a mist. Her only further recourse was the police or a private agency. Perhaps the latter would be better. Still, she knew nothing about such agencies and might easily fall into unscrupulous or incompetent hands. And after all, what did she really know? The springboard of her first real suspicion had been her conviction that the figure in Jim's coffin was wax. But she had questioned her own senses too often in that connection, belief had become diluted by doubt.

There remained, of course, Ronald Manning's letter. She re-read it a third time: ". . . most curious to see a trail of chimney smoke from a deserted portion of his estate. To see

it three days in a row. You are Jim's wife and you have certain rights." The implications were clear. As Jim's wife she should investigate the vicinity of the three hills. Was Jim there, alive? She tried to control the shaking of her hands.

But if Jim were a prisoner, why wouldn't he be kept here in this house with its rambling and deserted wings, not to mention its sound-proof laboratory? Her hands stilled with excitement. No, not quite sound-proof. Julie claimed to have heard scuffling sounds within the baize doors, and in spite of Mark's jesting he had been perturbed by her comments. Then, if Jim were still alive, the pieces of the puzzle fitted. Jim had been in the house when Sandra arrived. He had attempted to break out of the laboratory; that was what Julie had heard. And Mark had wasted no time in having Jim removed to a safer spot in the woods somewhere. A safer spot for Mark, that is. Not for Jim, whose real death may have taken place in that wooded wilderness, whose real grave might be there.

Of course by his own admission, Manning had broken faith. His letter might have been dictated solely by a cheap resentment against Mark. In spite of his alleged concern for Julie he had waited until he himself should be well away before taking a step that would bring Mark's anger down on him again.

Well, one couldn't stay smothered in this inertia forever. Almost any action was preferable to none at all. With that decision Sandra felt the first mental relief in three days. She would have plenty of time because Mark was completing a laboratory experiment and had asked if she would mind a very late lunch.

She turned toward the door. From Julie's suite she might

be able to locate any possible hills. With determination she crossed the corridor and entered the bedroom, which had already taken on that pitiable air of order and rigidity which characterized Jim's. But when she had pushed open the long window and stood on the balcony she was disappointed.

Though she stood at some height, the grounds swelled upwards toward the wooden section, so that it was impossible to see more than rough outlines beyond the first group of trees. She'd have to go to the third floor. Could she manage that without running into one of the servants? Fortunately it was nearly lunch time. Roberts and the gardeners ate before the family was served and she had judged from Marta's grumbling that this was a time when the maids foregathered to ogle the only men on the place. Well, it would be a trivial risk compared to those she had been taking.

Looking hastily around the room she noted various of the late periodicals in which Julie's heart had delighted, motion picture and fashion magazines. She collected these. If she were discovered on the way up she could magnanimously explain that she planned to put them in the servants' recreation room.

She stole up the stairs to the third floor. No one was in sight. Still clinging to her magazines, Sandra stopped in front of a closed door on the southern side of the house. There was no sound from inside. Then she tapped. A dolorous voice called to her to come in. It was Marta's voice.

Sandra drew a frightened breath, then squaring her shoulders walked in.

For the first time she saw the old woman's austerity shattered. Marta was lying on her bed, a wet cloth over her forehead. Her color was bad and the swollen pouches under her

eyes told of tears or a sleepless night. At Sandra's entrance she didn't stir but her stony look crumpled under surprise. Sandra marched steadily toward the bed.

"I'm sorry you're not feeling well, Marta," she said gently, "I brought up some magazines for you, but I'm afraid your head is too bad for you to read just yet. Can I do anything for you?"

"Who told you I was sick?" Marta snapped. But added grudgingly, "Not but what I don't thank you for your kind thought, Mrs. Demarest."

"Angela said something, I think," Sandra answered vaguely, placing the magazines on a nearby table. (She must fix Angela quickly.)

Marta grunted. "She's so flighty, it's a wonder she'd remember it. Yes, I've got one of my worst headaches. Starin' awake most of the night, I was."

"Miss Julie's death must have been a great blow to you, Marta." Marta chose that moment to shift her bandage, and her expression was invisible. She merely grunted again. Sandra moved across the floor toward the windows.

"Wouldn't you like these shades down a bit?" she suggested. "This bright light can't help your headache."

Marta's voice was querulous. "I would like them down, if you'd be so kind. If I moved from this bed my head would plain fall off, and those highty-tighty maids haven't come near me since breakfast. Not that I blame them much," she added grimly, "they won't be glad to see me up and about."

"That's a shame. I'll see that they give you more attention, but you mustn't think of moving until you feel quite equal to it."

All the time that she was speaking, Sandra was adjusting

the shades deliberately, prolonging her view at each of the three windows. Her last words trailed into incoherency, for she had seen three hills, three unmistakable hills, grouped together! Swiftly she noted that two diagonal lines starting respectively at the corner of the stable and the tree down the drive would find the apex of their triangle in one of the hills. She would have to be satisfied with those rough directions.

The last shade had been adjusted and now she started into attention, wondering if Marta had noted her intense interest. But it was evident that the woman's headache was too blinding for even her sharp eyes to function, and her goodbye as Sandra tiptoed from the room was only a murmur.

The vibration of the lunch gong was just fading as she ran down the stairs, wondering whether to feel elation or fear. She walked into the dining room and seated herself after a brief nod to Mark. Her mind was so preoccupied with her new and exciting problem that she gave bare pretense of listening to his desultory comments until one amazing sentence tore through the fabric of her concentration.

"—and so, my dear Sandra, this house will shelter only ghosts, for the next few years at least. And a damnably unpleasant old house it is, too," he added affably.

Sandra put down her fork.

"What did you say?" she asked slowly.

"I'm afraid you haven't been listening very closely," he reproached her, "or is it my profanity to which you object?"

"I wasn't listening," she confessed. "It was rude of me, but I was thinking of something quite important."

"The letter from your young man, perhaps? Tut-tut, you told me you had no prospects. Yet it was an interesting handwriting, very. Quite unscrupulous. If I were you I'd refuse

any offer of oil mines or matrimony from such a hand. Don't blush."

Sandra wasn't blushing. She was hot with anxiety. Mark must know Manning's handwriting. Or had Ronald always written to Julie's uncle on the typewriter? Mark looked bland enough, but you never could tell with him. At any rate, he wasn't pursuing the subject.

"I was just saying that I've had about enough of this beastly place. So have the servants. The isolation was bad enough for them before we had these deaths. Even Becket and Marta pine for different fields. My present experiments are about completed and I'll have to do a bit of traveling and writing the next few months. I'm going to shut this place up and leave a couple for caretakers. Perhaps I'll sell, who knows? It's lonely here without Julie."

"And Jim."

"And Jim, of course." There was a pause.

"When do you expect to shut up the house?" Sandra asked with an effort.

"In the next day or two, as soon as I can get the servants packed and out. Shan't have to move anything except my papers, because I'm putting up at my club in town for a bit. Of course it will be some time before the estate affairs can be wound up. You'll want to be in the vicinity of Boston until Davenport can wind up your affairs, so I may see you occasionally if you'll let me."

Mark lifted his coffee cup and Sandra was released from his eyes. In a day or two! In a day or two she must find Jim or call the police, or both. "I don't blame you for wanting to get away from the house. I've hardly been able to endure it myself today," she added. "If you don't think it callous of

me, I shall ride a bit this afternoon. Only on the estate, of course."

Mark waved his hand.

"Why don't you go even farther afield? There's a fine bridle path up the public turnpike. Miles of bark that offer a bit more of a canter than our home paths."

Sandra dropped her eyes to conceal their gleam. Her reply was sedate. "I shouldn't think of riding outside the estate so soon after Julie's funeral. It's just to please myself," she added gently, "because Julie and I have ridden in these woods together." She ignored Mark's faint frown, her conviction crystallizing. Mark did not want her to go into the woods of the estate. She left him looking a bit sulky and went to her room to put on the riding habit which Julie had given her. Mark was in the lower hall when she returned and he flung down his newspaper as she paused to draw on her gauntlets.

His brief ill-humor seemed to have disappeared and she wondered as he came forward whether she could have imagined it. "You're dressed quite warmly enough? This weather is colder than it looks. I'll come out to the stables with you. Roberts has some troubles that I was too busy to discuss yesterday."

They crossed the terrace, Sandra for her part steadfastly averting her eyes from the spot beneath Julie's windows. Roberts met them at the stable door, and his honest moon face was troubled as his eyes rested on Sandra. Then he turned to Mark after touching his cap to them both.

"The young lady was going riding, sir?" he asked anxiously. "I'm terrible sorry, sir, but both the mares needed shoeing. I said something about it to you yesterday. Sent the both of

them to the village with the youngster 'bout half an hour ago."

"I remember you said something, Roberts," Mark was thoughtful, "but I'm afraid I didn't pay much attention."

"Today seemed a good day, sir," said Roberts. His reproachful eye seemed to hint delicately that the young lady was offending his sense of propriety by wanting to canter so soon after Miss Julie's funeral. Sandra blushed but threw her chin out.

"How about the black, Roberts?"

"The General, miss?" The groom seemed thoroughly horrified. "That black is ugly. Only Mr. Mark and me ever ride him, and while you're a fair enough horsewoman for a beginner, miss, I don't advise the General."

"It's too bad," Mark said with apparent sincerity, as he and Sandra turned back toward the house. "I know a ride would have done you good."

"It doesn't matter." And then Sandra added abruptly. "You're probably wondering why I am not packing right now and leaving tonight, Mark. But you knew that Marta was ill today, didn't you? I ran up to see her for a few minutes. She'll probably be on deck tomorrow but she's miserable with this headache. There'll be some confusion getting the servants out and perhaps I could help her. You know she's the old-fashioned type that worries if things aren't done just so." As she babbled on she noted how Mark's face softened.

"That's very good of you," he said slowly, "but I didn't expect you to go until I did. And of course I'll want to see you settled comfortably in some good hotel. Don't forget that you're coming into a tidy little income and won't have to worry about expenses any more." For once there was no sar-

casm in his tone as he touched on that subject, but since she made no reply he went on, "I've got a herculean job ahead of me today sorting out the papers that must go journeying with me. Becket is scandalized to think they take more space than my clothes. If we plan to leave in a day or two it means a pretty steady grind to get weeded out."

Sandra walked on a few more paces and then paused, scanning the sky. "It's a glorious day even if it is a bit chilly. I believe I'll take a long walk, now that I'm togged in out-door things. My packing won't take an hour." Mark wheeled around and his face was blank. Sandra was enjoying herself. Let that pay him for his trickiness about the horses. Not for a moment did she believe anything but that he had hurried out after lunch and arranged the shoeing.

"You're going walking?" he repeated.

"Why not? No one will see me around here and I can crash through bushes to my heart's content in these things." It would be the poorest strategy to pretend she was going anywhere but through the woods, she reflected. But the three hills were off in the distance, and he might hope that her wanderings would not carry her so far.

"I'm almost tempted to go with you," he hesitated. Sandra smiled.

"I refuse to let you be tempted. You've just said you had heaps of work to do . . ."

"I could do it tonight."

"And if you insisted on going just to keep me company you'd blame me for it later."

Mark looked troubled.

"There are hundreds of acres of wood beyond here," he

warned her, "you could easily get lost for some time." Sandra slapped her boot with the crop.

"Oh, I shall keep to the bridle paths. In fact what I mean by a long walk won't be your idea of one." She nodded and started away. Turning off at the beginning of the winding bridle path, she looked back. Mark was entering his study door by the terrace. Had he had time while her back was turned to set Roberts on her trail? She doubted it, and at any rate she must take the risk.

Then suddenly she remembered her landmarks. After skirmishing a bit, she found a spot where she could see both the big elm by the car drive and the corner of the stable. If she imagined a long triangle with those points as the corners of the base, she would find one of the three hills at its apex. But on foot it was going to be more difficult to keep her bearings. She would have to follow the imaginary diagonal line from the elm. Once she had lost that line she must pin her hopes to finding some spot from which she could actually see the three hills. At the moment, she judged the sun to be almost directly over the spot she was seeking.

Fortunately the bridle path lay in that general direction for some distance, but after a time the bark road curved gracefully to the left. She would be forced to leave it and push through the pine grove beyond. Anxiously she looked about as she left the marked way. She had heard that people that were lost walked in circles. Of course she couldn't actually get lost for long; they would beat the woods for her. But would they? The dim coolness under these pines, which the sun spattered only at a great height, seemed communicated to her blood.

Had any one seen her go except Mark? Perhaps she would

eventually wish that Roberts had followed her! She shook these forbodings from her and walked on. A more practical annoyance bothered her now. She had left the soft carpet of the pines, and here before her was a tiny brook. It was an easy enough jump but the terrain beyond didn't look inviting. It had evidently been burned over once, and between the charred stumps had sprung hundreds of saplings, already hazed over with confusing green. Sandra sighed, congratulated herself on her heavy knee-length boots, and jumped across the brook.

The sapling grove was as obstinate as she had feared. Creepers tore at her feet and hands, branches snapped back into her face, the ground seemed corky and soggy. Still she pushed on, her eyes anxious on the setting sun, the scarf which bound her hair damp with perspiration.

Finally she halted and seated herself wearily on a stump. It was growing late and the feeble glow from the sky was no longer an accurate guide. Moreover the riding boots were becoming increasingly heavy, unsuited to walking. And ahead of her she could see nothing but this hateful, endless, sapling grove. The ground was firmer, to be sure, evidence that it was imperceptibly sloping upwards again, so that the tall trees on the further side were still invisible. Well, she could at least see the reassuring pine trees whose shelter she had left a while ago, though it seemed eons. She turned, and then gasped. Behind her, as in front of her, was nothing but this same brownish green net of saplings.

There was no use in getting panicky, she told herself, but she felt the perspiration chill on her forehead. To banish this vague terror she left her scarf on the stump and walked firmly a few yards on her back trail. Then she faltered and wheeled

around. There seemed to be no trail. These small trees were resilient and had sprung back, leaving no sign of her passing to her untrained eyes, while underfoot the corky ground oozed innumerable pools that might or might not be traces of her footprints. She had no idea of the direction from which she had come, except that it had not been the direction toward which the sun was traveling.

Well, thank heaven she could still see her scarf. She would return and walk on from the stump. At least while she followed the higher, firmer ground, she was probably approaching the site of the three hills. Only necessity urged her now as she stumbled onward. She had to reach some high place from which she could redirect her course.

Now the ground rose abruptly. The saplings seemed to be thinning, the soil was rockier. Sandra's spirits rose with the ascent of the grade and she scrambled up, forgetting her chafed feet and throbbing pulse. She reached the summit of the knoll, and it seemed that her heart slowed to an almost frightened beat as she saw before her two hills. There were two of them. Where was the other? Then she laughed at her own stupidity. She was standing on it, for while it did not reach the height of those two in the distance, it still elevated itself far above the clearing below.

Sandra could see only a portion of the clearing for this side of the slope was wooded with tall monarchs of trees. But she saw that the little valley was undoubtedly ringed around by three hills. Moreover that glimpse of open space, and the silver arc of a brook which trickled through it, indicated the most likely site for a camp.

The last stage of her quest had begun. What would she do when she reached that clearing? She didn't know, but a

new access of hope sent her almost running down the slope, dodging the great trees, pushing the bushy undergrowth aside, recklessly scaling formidable boulders. Ahead of her was a spread of bush that her eyes and presently her hands told her was wild blackberry. Momentarily it obscured her view of the clearing. It was but a moment's task to bind the scarf about her face to protect it from the reaching brambles. The cloth almost blinded her but at least it allowed her to plunge through the bush with the speed of a slim battering ram.

And then it happened.

Her whole body felt a tremendous blow which hurled it back and threw it helplessly into the waiting tentacles of the prickly branches.

11

FOR A MOMENT Sandra lay dazed, but fortunately the bush for all its thorns had also the resiliency of a wire spring. It had torn her hands and ripped the scarf from her face, but it had broken her fall. Confused, ridiculous fragments went through her mind as her heart seemed to accelerate rather than quiet down.

Then gradually she became aware that the silence was utter. What on earth had hurled her back with such force? For the blow had not been localized, rather it had struck impartially the entire length of her body. Had she stepped on the end of a concealed board? She opened her eyes cautiously. Still no sound except that of the wind whipping down the slope. Then she turned her head, sat up and gazed with honest amazement.

Absolutely nothing was visible to account for her accident. There was no board at her feet or nearby. She rose unsteadily, thrusting her scarf into her pocket, and stepped forward, this time cautiously. Better to face an impersonal menace than to dash back up the hill with bursting heart, this whole venture a failure.

She pushed the branches timidly aside, her head drawn back to evade another blow. Then she stopped and her lips curled in a sheepish little grin.

There before her was a high, closely woven wire net, a fence that would give before a blow but which would return it in

kind, and with interest. Racing downwards as she had been doing so recklessly, the strong wire had thrown her back much as a racket returns a tennis ball. It had served her right for almost blinding herself with the scarf.

Yet even so she would not readily have seen the net. Hands more cunning that nature's had interwoven the blackberry vines through and around it so that it was invisible from three feet of distance. Sandra studied it thoughtfully. Such a fence, accurately contrived and of an expensive nature, was an odd thing to discover in this wilderness that afforded no fodder for cattle.

Obstacle that it was, it was the one thing needed to convince her that Jim was confined behind it somewhere. Was there no way in?

She followed it for some distance, but always it presented an impenetrable front. Now bafflement was angering her. Time was rushing by too; it was growing perceptibly darker every moment. At intervals she attempted to find footholds in the tiny interstices of the wire, but the attempt was futile for the net was too closely woven. As well try to climb a huge window screen. Then another thought struck her. Would it be possible to find a branch of sufficient strength to lay against the barrier, and so reach the top?

She was dubious, but after a search she discovered a bough that might suit the purpose. It was sturdy enough, so sturdy that although she managed to drag it, it was a shoulder-wrenching task to lift it. Inch by inch she worked, resting it in its progress upward against the net, whose openings, too tiny for a foothold, obligingly presented a rough surface that kept the branch from slipping down. At last a tremendous heave landed one end precariously on top of the fence. Ten-

derly Sandra urged it to a more secure hold, holding her breath lest it slip entirely. Then on the ground end she bolstered the rude ladder with three large stones, wiped her begrimed hands on her scarf and surveyed her work.

It will have to hold, she decided grimly.

The branch trembled even under her slight weight but she climbed steadily along it. In another moment she had reached the top of the fence. She swung herself to a sitting position on it and let herself down, hanging on by her hands. Then she dropped to the ground and turned her face toward the clearing. The return trail was definitely barred now and her only hope lay ahead of her. Twilight was falling quickly here in the valley and she felt fairly assured of being unobserved. Still, there was a great need of caution, so while she walked forward swiftly her progress was as silent as possible. Already the woody underbrush showed signs of being thinned by human hands and in a brief space she stood at the edge of it, looking directly down the little valley.

Although it was no more than three hundred yards across, the clearing extended out of sight to the right and left, and through it ran a small, turbulent brook which directly in front of her had been widened into a respectable pool. At the edge of that pool sprawled a long low cabin, entirely constructed of logs, even to its capacious and rustic porch over which creepers clambered.

A light bloomed in one of the windows as Sandra looked, and in spite of herself she felt that her quest was losing reality. For the whole scene, with the last false sunset glow that poured over the shoulder of the further hill and reflected in the quiet pool and the peaceful serenity of the cabin with its

warm lighted windows, seemed to defy the thought of death or treachery.

She saw instantly that the cabin wasn't new, and that its rusticity was lovingly, not carelessly, contrived. The explanation was thrust on her. This land had long been in the Caldwell family. She had heard Julie speak casually of an old game preserve that had been given up for years, ever since her grandfather's death. This cabin had doubtless once been a family camp or gamekeeper's home.

But the reason for its present use might be more sinister.

Even as she loitered uncertainly daylight left this little depression between the hills. Night had struck suddenly and completely and Sandra dared to approach within yards of the cabin. She was in range of an ordinary speaking voice when she suddenly threw herself flat on the ground. She had heard a voice, and from a corner of the porch drifted the odor of pipe tobacco. Inching herself forward she listened intently. It was a woman's voice.

"Please hurry with your swim." A swim, this early in the season? Someone was a Spartan, Sandra thought shiveringly. "Supper's almost ready," the voice went on. Sandra's heart sank at these commonplace words but she strained her ears for the reply.

"Two shakes and I'll be back, Mrs. Laidell." Mrs. Laidell! She had heard Mark mention that name to his mysterious visitor in the laboratory. But that voice, had she heard it before? Was it—could it be—Jim's? She was aghast to realize that after these many months she was not sure of tones which she had heard for only three days. She'd have to chance standing up and stealing forward to a shadowed corner on the porch. Below the railings of the veranda she crouched

and saw the man outlined darkly against the pool's reflection. She stared.

It was Jim. No mistaking, even in the dusk, that pale helmet of hair. Sandra's heart vaulted in such a wild confusion that she was paralyzed for a moment, surprised by that very confusion. What was the root of it? Could it be that in spite of her determined spying and seeking, she had subconsciously believed in the fact of Jim's death? That she had been prepared for the real grave, not the living man? Perhaps that was the reason for the queer sense of guilt that troubled her now. She brushed a hand across her eyes and looked again. Jim was moving toward the pool, and he was followed.

Close behind him, sauntering easily down the steps, was the huge bearded man whom she had seen but twice before. As Jim waded into the pool Sandra watched his follower settle himself comfortably but with deliberation on a rock close to the water's edge. His powerful hands rested easily enough on his knees and she listened incredulously to the banter that passed between the two men, the low rumbling growl that replied to the brisker tones of the younger man.

"Not too cold, Jackson. Why not try it? Be good for that sloppy fat of yours."

"Muscle like I got needs fat to protect it, Mr. Demarest. Better not stay in too long. Oh, I know the doc's all for it, but it's April, not August."

"Try and get me out. I won from you last night and that gives me an extra ten minutes in here. I'll call Mrs. Laidell as witness."

Jackson rose. "Then I guess I'll eat my own supper."

Jim waved an amiable assent and dived from the springboard.

An extra ten minutes! Sandra must make use of that. Whatever the situation here—and for the moment it baffled her comprehension—it was evident that Jackson was a jailer, if an affable one. This was a heaven-sent opportunity. She scrambled up and hurried around the back of the cabin, avoiding the glow from the kitchen windows. She skirted the house and now at the far edge of the pool she stooped behind a sheltering clump of bush and tugged at her heavy boots. When they had been removed she thrust them with her gauntlets, coat and scarf, into the depths of the bush. If she couldn't attract Jim's attention to this side of the pool, she would have to swim out to him.

For a few seconds she stood there despairingly. She had no fear of Jackson's observation, for the shadow of the hill beneath which she stood must have completely obliterated her silhouette. But unfortunately that meant that Jim didn't see her either. She'd have to wade in.

Those few yards constituted a nightmare. Would Jim exclaim, cry out, bring Jackson lumbering into the pool like some uncouth amphibian animal? Now she was very near the man, only a few feet away. She sank deep into the water, spoke in as clear and low a voice as she could master.

"Jim, don't make a sound, for God's sake! It's Sandra!" There was a startled cessation of his flailing arms, but before he could answer she hurried on. "Surely you remember my voice? Keep swimming around me. Why are you here? I'm staying at Willow Miles with Mark. I went there as you told me to, looking for you. How shall I get you out? Swim to the outer edge of the pool. I'll meet you there."

She had blurted out anything, anything that would give Jim a chance to recover his wits. Now she felt her voice fail-

ing under the equal impact of the icy water and the urgency of the situation. She turned from him and in a few moments dragged herself from the pool. Though he had taken a more circuitous route he was there before her, peering at her through the gloom.

"Sandra," he said, then added slowly, as a child might stumble over a forgotten lesson, "You're Dr. Marshall's granddaughter."

The chill that Sandra felt was no longer merely physical. But she spoke quietly enough. "Something more too, Jim. Your wife."

"So it's really true," he said without surprise. "I thought it was just one of those odd dreams I have so often, ever since my accident."

"What accident? How long have you been here? You never told Mark of our marriage then? Why, Jim, don't you remember, that was the reason we were married, so you could get your money!" Suddenly realizing that her voice was rising, she seated herself cross-legged on the ground and motioned him down beside her. "What accident?" she repeated sharply, but in a lowered tone.

He shook his head from side to side as though there were an invisible gnat about his ears. "I don't remember. I don't remember much of anything these days. When I'm stronger it will be different, of course. How did you get here?" His tone was almost petulant. "It's quite important for me not to see visitors until I'm much stronger."

Sandra ignored that. "Didn't you ask what kind of an accident it was? A car collision, for instance? If you didn't have a chance to tell Mark about our marriage, then it must have happened on your way here from Cambridge. For God's sake,

Jim, aren't you even curious?" She pressed frantically against his silence and at last he spoke.

"No," he said finally, "it's better for me not to be curious. It just unsettles me and then I don't sleep well."

Sandra stared at him through the twilight. With her marriage to Jim she had walked into a good many fantastic situations, but this was something even her sharpened imagination could not have anticipated. She felt stunned, as though she had been rudely slapped. And to guess what lay behind Jim's condition didn't comfort her any. Probably a car accident; obviously a concussion and ensuing amnesia. How convenient for Mark! So convenient that he might have planned it. Or perhaps there hadn't been any accident. Perhaps a certain blow hadn't been struck quite hard enough and Mark's henchman had had no stomach for a second attempt. In any event, Mark had no doubt figured that Jim in this condition was just as effectively out of the way as though he were dead. Mark wasn't sadistic. He wouldn't kill for the sake of killing.

"Are they kind to you?" she asked in a tone subdued with despair.

He was surprised. "Of course. Why shouldn't they be?"

"You have medicines, that sort of thing?" Mark and his drugs, she thought.

"Oh, yes, whenever I need it. Or I wouldn't sleep well."

No, she thought, you wouldn't sleep. Your mind would come out of this lethargy. You'd begin to remember. You'd realize you were a prisoner, not a patient. So your "medicine" is very important, my poor Jim—to Mark.

"Jim," she said quietly, "I'm your wife. You do remember that now. You must trust me. This place isn't good for you. You're not getting well quickly enough. I want you to leave

here at once. But Mark won't like it and we don't want to have trouble with Mark, do we?"

He said hurriedly, "No, we don't want to have trouble with Mark. No, I really don't want to have any trouble with Mark. Perhaps I'd better stay here."

"You can't stay here," she repeated firmly, "and if you do as I say, there won't be any trouble with Mark because we won't ever see him again, except in court. Isn't there some path out to the highway?"

"There's a gate to the main boulevard that way," he gestured vaguely, "but it's locked."

She scrambled to her feet. "Then come on. Perhaps we can climb over it." He stood up and in the dimness she could see his fingers go to his lips irresolutely. "You must," she whispered. "I didn't want to tell you now, Jim, but Mark has had you declared dead! There were funeral services for you only a little while ago!"

She waited for his horrified reaction. But his voice had only a chuckle of sly admiration. "Good old Mark's always up to something. Inventor's mind, you know. Though he didn't really invent that. Remember Tom Sawyer and his funeral?"

Sandra's voice shook. "You mean you were at your own funeral, hidden somewhere?"

"I wasn't actually there," he said and added fretfully, "but I'd naturally know about my own funeral, wouldn't I?"

Sandra's tension exploded in a shrapnel of anger and desperation. Only the most tragic shock could wake him, it was evident. She couldn't shield him from it any longer.

"Then I suppose you know of Julie's death too. I suppose you know she was killed accidentally, according to Mark." Her tone underlined the adverb contemptuously. "I don't

have to tell you anything about it because Mark has told you, of course. Mark's always right, isn't he? And we don't want any trouble with Mark, do we?" Her whispered words flailed at him relentlessly. Then she fell chokingly silent, like a runner who has spent his last reserves without reaching the goal. But suddenly Jim was gripping her shoulders, almost shaking her with a strength that bruised.

"Julie's dead? Julie's been killed? Mark?" For the first time his voice was stripped of its vagueness.

Even as he spoke there came a hail from the cabin and Jim called back, "Coming!" Then his voice dropped again. Low as it was, it held a strident note, like the humming of an icy wind along a telegraph wire.

"Get me a file from the tool-shed and drop it in the forsythia bush by the gate to the boulevard. I'll get it somehow. Jackson and I walk there afternoons."

"Hurry! He's coming down to the pool," Sandra breathed.

"I'll throw a note over the gate, into the bush on the other side. Look for it tomorrow, if you can."

Another hail from Jackson and suddenly Jim had dropped her arm and was gone. She listened despairingly to the muffled sound of his strokes across the pool. Where was the tool-shed? Where was the boulevard, let alone the gate and the forsythia bush? Jim, of course, hadn't known she was totally lost. Well, the first thing to do was to circle the pool and retrieve her boots and jacket.

It was an almost impossible ask for her to pull the boots on, but she accomplished it, and the struggle warmed her. Then she stood up. In those few minutes she had faced her only possible course. She must find dry clothes, she must be guided to the boulevard. Otherwise she could never locate the

gate. The two jailers offered her the only and very slim hope. After all, they couldn't do any more than keep her prisoner until Mark came to decide her fate, for it was obvious that that they treated Jim kindly enough. And it was possible that she could put over the role of innocent intruder.

She drew close to the rough bark wall of the cabin, studying the lighted window within line of her gaze. It was ebony dark now and the wind howling down from three slopes had ripped from the valley its twilight air of serenity. Supper must have been an affair of Arcadian simplicity for already the woman, Mrs. Laidell, was removing the dishes. She was a massive, florid-faced matron in her late forties, Sandra judged, and saw in the square-jowled face a strong resemblance to Marta. Jackson was filling his pipe, his tiny, piggy eyes half closed as he tamped in the tobacco, and Sandra noted that in sheer bulk he seemed to dominate the room. Even his black beard was on an heroic scale. Jim, wrapped in an expensive-looking, comfortably shabby bath-robe, sat with his back to the window, to Sandra's disappointment. Strange how difficult it was to recall his features, and the colorless shine of his hair seemed only to emphasize that anonymity. Well, she'd really see him soon enough.

Mrs. Laidell had seated herself at the cleared table and now she was slapping down a deck of cards. A log which crashed in the fireplace threw a banner of light across her intent face. Jackson had leaned forward immediately at her action but Jim only yawned.

"At it again, you two? What are you playing for tonight?"

The woman looked at him ingratiatingly. "Won't you have a little game, Mr. Demarest?"

Jim shook his head and laughed. "Not I. You win with

monotonous regularity. I haven't another thing to lose except my swimming trunks. Thank heaven, I don't need cuff-links here!" Sandra wished again that she could see his face. It seemed incredible that he could be so good an actor, that he could laugh and joke like this within minutes of hearing about Julie. Or perhaps he'd slipped right back into that drugged lethargy again, she thought anxiously. And yet his voice still had that thin alert edge to it.

"There's your reading lamp, it could count fifty chips," Mrs. Laidell suggested. "Bet on me having it for a week." Jim shook his head and rose.

"Not a chance. It's the only decent light in the place. I'm going to turn in right now and read in bed."

Jackson heaved himself from his chair and followed. A door, two doors slammed, and Sandra realized that she wouldn't see Jim again tonight, for it was obvious that even the simple matter of his retiring was accompanied by supervision. In the interval before Jackson returned she watched the woman eagerly. It was an interesting face, greedy rather than evil, stolid rather than unyielding; as was Marta's. Were the two women related? Not unlikely, considering the circumstances. In that moment Sandra conceived her plan. She strode noisily toward the veranda. Up the steps she clumped, her boots already wet with the water from her drenched clothing. Then she knocked boldly on the door.

There was instant silence in the room beyond. She knocked again.

Footsteps moved hurriedly to the door and it was opened a cautious inch. The woman stood there, and even before her blinking eyes could have clearly seen Sandra, her finger was laid to her lips. Was she expecting someone? Sandra stepped

forward and the woman held the door wider for her entrance. If she was astounded at the girl's very appearance as well as her bedraggled condition she didn't show it, for her finger still lay significantly against her mouth.

"Who are you? What do you want?" she whispered in a singularly toneless voice. "We have a sick child in the other room, so don't make any noise."

Now Sandra understood. The couple had been expecting no one, but of course they had been warned to conceal Jim's presence. She stepped further into the room, closed the door and spoke in a tired whisper.

"I'm from Clear Valley—place down the line," she murmured with calculated incoherency. "I was out riding. Horse ran up against something, threw me. When I picked myself up I found I was on the other side of a high fence, must have somersaulted right over my mount's head. Can you give me some dry clothes and show me the way to the main road? I've had a hell of a time running into brambles and falling in brooks and things. Just about all in when I saw your light."

Deliberately she seated herself in the nearest wooden chair and slapped her knee with a wet gauntlet.

"My dear woman, say something—or whisper it, will you? Fearfully sorry about your youngster, but you'll have me on your hands all night too if I don't get into something dry. And you must have a man around the place who'll lead me back to the boulevard. I can hoof it from there though I'll get the dickens if my mount hasn't found his way back to the stables." She yawned. "I could get pneumonia and no one'd worry, but Dad and the boys would fuss over him all night if he got crocked." She swept a look at the woman. The latter finally spoke, bewildered under this babble.

"I can lend you a dry coat and skirt," she said stiffly, "and my husband can take you to the turnpike. You won't want to carry them wet things with you. Where shall we deliver them?"

As she spoke she had kneeled on the floor and was tugging at the wet boots. Sandra swallowed. This woman wasn't as stupid as she looked. As yet she suspected nothing, but she was curious as to the girl's identity. Sandra snatched hastily at a vaguely remembered bit of gossip.

"You could deliver the stuff at my home. I'm Janey Meredith. But I wouldn't let you. I'll dry myself out and wear my own duds home. This escapade will be about the last honk without my trailing home in borrowed clothes." Thank goodness the Merediths were such recent arrivals in the neighborhood it was very unlikely that this couple were familiar with the faces of either of the two Meredith girls, though they may have heard rumors of Janey's lurid reputation.

Mrs. Laidell heaved herself up and placed the boots near the crackling fire.

"They're not very wet inside, Miss Meredith," she said thoughtfully. Sandra lounged up from her seat.

"Well-oiled leather sheds like a duck," she observed, "and I wear 'em tight at the knee. Now how about a place to change—er—"

"Mrs. Jackson."

"Mrs. Jackson. This is frightfully good of you," she whispered as she followed the woman into a small, austerely furnished bedroom. "If you've an old bathrobe, I'll hop into it and toast my toes at the fire 'til my things are half dry."

"It'll take some time." Mrs. Laidell was somewhat inhospitable. "Those breeches are pretty heavy."

"Oh, they'll dry, they'll dry." And Sandra began to strip with an airy disregard of her hostess' more Victorian feelings. She accomplished her purpose, for after producing a bath towel Mrs. Laidell hastily retreated, leaving her unwelcome guest to bring out the drenched clothing.

Sandra toweled herself vigorously, and her face in the wavy old mirror threw back an almost gleeful reflection. She had done it! So far she had walked the tight-rope without a misstep. Would Jackson, whose name the woman had taken so unceremoniously, prove as simple a proposition? She bit her lip. Perhaps he was already telephoning guardedly to Mark, asking for instructions as to this unwelcome visitor. She drew the ample bath-robe about her, and rubbed the damp bronze curls vigorously.

But did they have a telephone? Surely they would have suggested in that case that she call her house and have someone meet her at the boulevard. Moreover a telephone meant linesmen and defective wires occasionally and all the inquisitive paraphernalia of modern mechanism. Absolute secrecy was the essence of this prison camp that Mark had planned. A mere whisper about the presence of a man supposedly buried would set the world about his ears. No, there was probably no telephone.

Sandra gathered the wet clothing in her hand and pattered out into the big living-room, bare toes just visible under the long folds of her wrapper. She stopped short as she saw Jackson, and gazed with polite inquiry at Mrs. Laidell. The latter relieved her of the clothing and while spreading the various articles on an improvised rack before the fire, introduced him without turning around.

"This is my husband, Mr. Jackson," she whispered. "The

young lady's name is Miss Meredith, Bill. From Clear Valley. You remember? The family who just moved in?"

The man touched his forehead, and answered brusquely. "Heard of your family, Miss Meredith. We don't see nobody these days though. Got a kid here with T.B. Only ten years old. Pretty tough. Has a bit of fever t'night that worries us. Asleep now."

Jackson was studying her with a curiosity that disconcerted Sandra. Had he ever seen her when she was unaware of his presence? Just as she had glimpsed him twice without his knowledge? Yet she stood with her back to the fireplace and looked at him with lazy disinterest.

"Tough having a kid ill; lucky he can sleep anyway. You've a nice, comfortable place here. Looks like a hunting camp."

There was no reply to this. Sandra yawned again and throwing herself into a chair by the big center table, she picked up the pack of cards. "Too bad we haven't a fourth—or don't you play bridge?"

"No, we don't." As though Sandra had uttered some magic formula, both man and woman pulled up chairs close to her and eyed first the cards and then her face. Shuffling the deck dexterously, Sandra whispered again.

"How about some three-handed poker? We'll have to kill time somehow, 'til my things dry out a bit."

Mrs. Laidell opened her mouth to reply but the man interrupted sternly. "We don't play poker with no young ladies." Sandra grinned up at him.

"My brothers tell me I'm not a young lady, just a brat. Are you afraid I'll take your shirts? Don't worry, I'm rotten at it. Dropped two hundred and my pet wrist watch a week ago. Dad says I can sweat for another like it. So I'm wearing this

old thing." She threw a disgusted look at her wrist. "Come on, the kid's asleep. We'll play for matches if you'd rather, but it's obvious we can't sit and stage-whisper at each other for an hour or so. Let's have a little stud poker. Or seven card, if you like."

Mrs. Laidell yanked her chair to the table with a defiant look at the man. In a second or two he followed her example. The older woman spoke dryly. "What'll we play for?" Sandra shrugged.

"I've eighty dollars or so somewhere in the jeans. If I lose that I'll stake this thing," she indicated her watch. Mrs. Laidell's eyes glittered.

"It isn't so much the money," she mumbled, "but it's no fun gambling without stakes."

"Righto. Got any chips?"

With miraculous celerity the woman produced a box of much thumbed cardboard chips from a drawer in the table and began to count them out, sorting the colors carefully. Presently Jackson began to help her, as though the sight of the chips had overcome his disapproval.

Sandra eyed the two from under her thick lashes and hoped fervently that she had forgotten none of her poker lore. It didn't matter whether she won or lost, her only object at the moment was to concentrate their interest on the cards and not on herself. If she could keep them absorbed until her clothes dried, half her plan would be accomplished.

"Make the blue chips a dollar, the red ones fifty and the whites a quarter," Jackson mumbled suddenly. Sandra raised her eyebrows at him.

"Well, you old sport! But make them fifty, a quarter and ten. I don't mind losing the roll and the watch, providing

you see me to the boulevard. But you'd clean me out in half an hour and we've got to kill time somehow. Come on, cut."

At the end of half an hour Sandra was ruefully regarding a much diminished pile of chips. It was her deal.

"Have to be lucky this time," her voice was husky with whispering, "and I've a hunch that I'll get the breaks. Anyway I'm crossing my fingers at you two." Her evident good humor caused the man to nod approvingly at her. There was condescension in Mrs. Laidell's smile. Evidently she felt the game so far had been profitable, but far from exciting.

Sandra dealt, and let her eyes widen perceptibly as she glanced at her concealed card. The betting began, and when each player's four exposed cards had been dealt, Sandra displayed three Queens and a four of Clubs; Jackson surveyed imperturbably a seven, eight, nine and Jack of spades; Mrs. Laidell's eyes roamed over the table and then came back to her own cards, two aces and two Jacks. She placed a blue chip before her.

Jackson called her but Sandra immediately threw in a blue and red chip. She was promptly not only covered, but the older woman added another blue counter. Jackson shook his head, pushed his chips into the center pile and gathered up his cards. There was a silence. Mrs. Laidell perhaps held a full-house, but it was Sandra's last chance. She hesitated and then threw in her remaining blue chips, six of them. She'd force the woman out if she had to walk home barefoot, for in the last few minutes she had thought of a further scheme.

But Mrs. Laidell picked up her cards sulkily. Sandra gathered in the chips and then relented. She needn't show it of course, yet she turned over the concealed card. It was a seven of diamonds. "I'm sorry," she said meekly. "I suppose you

had a full-house? Why didn't you call me? I just had to bluff. I was stony." Mrs. Laidell shrugged stolidly.

"It's the game. Come on, it's your deal, Bill."

In another forty-five minutes the game was over. Every chip had found its way to Sandra's collection and now Jackson was drawing a grimy roll from his pocket. Sandra collected, and then strolled across to the rack before the fire.

"Clothes almost dry enough to put on," she whispered, "let's have one more round. Bet anything! Come on. I'll put up my wrist watch against the silver frame on your dresser, Mrs. Jackson. And five dollars against—well, let's see—the pick of your chest of tools, Mr. Jackson."

Jackson shook with rumbling laughter. "What'd a young lady want with a hammer or a saw, Miss Meredith?"

"To defend myself after you leave me on the boulevard," she answered flippantly. "Or better still, give me a file, a good strong file. Dad'll probably lock me up on bread and water after this escapade and I could use it! While I think of it, never mention that I was here, that'd just make matters worse."

"We won't," Mrs. Laidell promised fervently and Sandra went on.

"Don't even tell me just where this place is, then I'll be able to lie with a straight face if any one ever mentions it. They'd be sure to think I'd run into romance and Dad would come on a run to make things hot for you." Jackson's face was grim.

"Don't worry, miss, I'll set you on the highway and you'll be through for always with the place. Now if you'll get dressed we'll be moving along. Your folks'll be cruising up and down looking for you before long."

Sandra hesitated. "One more deal?" she pleaded. "Or rather, I'll play cold hands against each of you separately and give you a chance for revenge. Come on, Mrs. Jackson, you first. My wrist watch against your silver picture frame."

The woman slid back into her chair, refusing to meet Jackson's reproving eyes. In another three minutes she was triumphantly clasping a small watch about her plump wrist. Sandra fastened it for her, and then looked coaxingly at Jackson. "Come on, five dollars against anything in your tool chest."

"That's silly," he mumbled, "what would you—"

"Oh, I'd tie the hammer with a big pink bow and hang it up in my room to remind me of the night I was rescued. Come on, be a sport."

Presently Jackson pushed back his chair. "I said it was silly," he said disgustedly, "but I'll go get you the hammer or saw or what you want."

"On second thought," Sandra was pensive, "a saw or hammer would be a bit awkward to carry. Now a file—I could slip it through my belt like a stiletto. Useful and romantic. I'm not too happy about that long walk home."

"Why don't you take the young lady back in the car?" Mrs. Laidell suggested. "It's only a few minutes walk from the boulevard to the place we garage it down the line," she added. Sandra looked wistful.

"That would be heavenly," she said. "But I couldn't let you do it. My brothers will be patrolling up and down the main road looking for me. I'd better go back by myself. You'd be surprised how suspicious they are. Besides I'd hate to leave you alone with that sick child of yours."

Jackson looked a little startled and embarrassed. "She's

right, Sarah, he might take a turn for the worst any minute—"

"I'll be ready in a jiffy then."

Sandra gathered up her clothes, vanished into the bedroom, and dressed with trembling fingers. Had her implausible ragging about the file carried any conviction? The next few minutes would decide the matter. She could only put her faith in the genuine gambling instincts of the two. But it might be wise to do one other thing.

From her breeches pocket she drew a damp memorandum book and a stubby pencil. It was difficult to write without tearing the paper, which was as soft as a blotter, but she finally succeeded in scribbling a few lines:

My dear Mrs. Jackson:

You two are good sports so I am not returning the money I won. But I do hope you will take these bills and buy something for the sick boy. I appreciate your kindness to me tonight. Remember—mum's the word!

JANEY MEREDITH.

This note she laid on the dresser, securely tethered by three bills of ample denomination. It was more than possible that with these, Mrs. Laidell would find it unnecessary to mention the visitor to Mark.

She stuffed her scarf into her pocket and returned to the living-room. Jackson and the woman were arguing in low tones by the door as she entered the room, and now Mrs. Laidell swung around. "I'm telling Bill you was just joking," she whispered. "He'd ought to give you five dollars. What good is an old file to you?"

Sandra shook her head gaily, and relieved Jackson of the long triangular-edged object he held.

"But I do want the file." Her laugh was low, but she felt

her heart thump heavily. "A bet's a bet. And besides, I've taken all his money!"

The older woman yielded, and Jackson handed over the file with a relieved look. In another moment Sandra had thanked Mrs. Laidell and was following the man down the veranda steps.

He walked steadily ahead, the girl but a pace or two behind him. Either he possessed the eyes of a cat, or the road was as familiar to him as the contours of his own face, for he led her unfalteringly along a bark path that was absolutely indistinguishable to her straining eyes. But it didn't matter. If she succeeded in hiding the file, she wouldn't have to come this way again. Jim would come after her.

"We'll be there pretty soon," Jackson said presently.

"Good," her laugh was forced. "These woods are spookier every minute." As she spoke she took the scarf from her pocket and rapidly wound the file in its folds. The long piece of silk was fortunately of a dull striped brown and would be unnoticed except for eyes looking for it.

"Here's the gate," he mumbled.

Sandra edged closer to the man and heard him fumbling with a padlock. Where, oh where, was the forsythia bush? It was impossible to distinguish anything in this Stygian gloom. Then, blessedly, Jackson scratched a match, after warmly addressing under his breath the elusive lock. In those brief seconds she hastily glanced around and saw the forsythia, already a misty yellow, close by the gate. The match flickered and died, evidently burning Jackson's fingers in its last spurt of life. As it did so, Sandra thrust her arm through the bush and dropped the weighted scarf into the center of the close branches.

"Just a second," Jackson muttered. "Use this every day—always sticks."

The gate swung open, and suddenly the man's heavy paw swung out and gripped her arm. "The path's rough here. Just a short way to the main road now."

"How the devil do you get your provisions in?" Sandra asked calmly.

He grunted. "Got a car down the line. Drive the car to here and load the wheel-barrow. Easier and cheaper than making a motor road to the camp."

"Well, well, here we are." Her voice was gay as they plunged through the over-hanging branches and found at their feet, dim under a pale sky, the sluggish black trail of the boulevard. She could have fallen down and kissed its tarred expanse. "Here's where I struggle on alone."

"Don't go wandering 'bout here often, miss. All the woods 'round here are tricky. Y'all set now?"

"All set. But remember, don't mention me to anybody. Anybody! Or I'll come back and haunt you!"

"Won't. G'night." There was a thrashing in the bushes, a click of the gate padlock yards away, and Sandra stood alone.

But before she took a single step away from the spot, she impaled her handkerchief on a branch of the bush at her elbow. With any luck she should be able to find this place tomorrow.

12

SANDRA STRUCK OFF at a brisk walk. She had no idea how far she was from Willow Miles, but at least she was walking directly toward it and not circling about in the woods. The distance should be cut in half. If she could have confined her thoughts to the hours which had just passed, her speculations might have been almost pleasant, shot through by her knowledge that Jim was alive, by her delight in having outwitted Jackson and Mrs. Laidell. But her mind unwillingly projected itself toward the situation that lay ahead. What on earth should she say to Mark? A part of the truth of course. He could never disprove her story unless Jackson or Mrs. Laidell babbled, and in that case everything was up anyway.

Suddenly as she trudged along, she felt a curious let-down, an emptiness. It was as though all her energies had run to a peak and then mysteriously evaporated. In this blankness of mind it seemed that Jim had been more real to her before she had found him. She set her shoulders impatiently. I'm just physically and nervously all in, she thought with mild disinterest, just the way I felt right after Julie died. It will pass.

It was difficult to gauge the passage of time, but she judged that she had walked nearly half an hour before she reached the house. Becket let her in. He was too good a servant to ask questions of course, but as she hurried up the stairs she saw him entering the library, rushing to Mark.

She closed her bedroom door and met her tired, dishevelled

reflection in the great mirror. A hot tub and something to eat were, at the moment, the most important things in the world. When Angela appeared the tub was already drawn and Sandra cut short the girl's exclamations of curiosity and solicitude.

"Just lost in the woods, that's all. Stupid of me but here I am, like the bad penny. And Angela, bring me a week's supply of food!"

A little later she pushed the tray aside and looked longingly at the bed. But of course Mark would be coming up soon—for explanations. Nevertheless, when Angela finally ushered him in, Sandra found that she was not prepared, after all, for his expression.

It was a ravaged face, pale, distorted. Had he sensed her discovery of his secret? She forced her lips to a stiff, apologetic little smile, but the man spoke first, leaning heavily on the back of a chair, as though the sight of her had brought actual physical weakness.

"You found your way home! My God, I thought you were lost in those woods! Where were you? What happened?" His words stumbled over each other and Sandra found new composure in her realization that at the moment she was more in command of herself than was he.

"Do sit down. You must have been worried. So was I, to tell the truth! I wandered off the bridge path to pick some pussy-willows that I thought I saw at a distance. Thank heaven, anyway, that it wasn't the proverbial butterfly I chased! I couldn't have forgiven myself for being as banal as that. Anyway, I got into some sort of copse of saplings that seemed to go on and on forever. I couldn't find my way for a long time. When it grew dark I lay down and took a nap, I was so dreadfully tired. It was wet and uncomfortable but

I was all in. Then I pushed on, and more by good luck than by good management I hit the boulevard. I was so twisted by that time that I walked up it a long way in the wrong direction before a car came along and set me right. They offered me a lift but I thought I'd better take no more chances. So, here I am!"

Mark had seated himself opposite her, his head in his hands, but now he looked up.

"I was worried sick. I thought you were lost," he muttered. "Roberts and I have been beating the bridle paths ever since dinner time, because I knew you'd surely be back by then if you weren't lost. No mishaps at all? But I can see you're all right."

Sandra nodded.

"My only mishap was being frightfully hungry and getting myself bogged a bit. The ground was pretty swampy. Thank goodness I didn't see any snakes. I think even a quail would have set me shrieking." She yawned. "Honestly, I'm terribly sorry not to have taken your advice about keeping to the paths, and I only wish you hadn't been so upset too. I feel very guilty. Am I forgiven?"

The man rose heavily, as though resiliency had gone from him. Sandra could see now the extent of the relief he felt. It wasn't relief at her return, she realized; but at his conviction that she hadn't blundered into his secret. But had she convinced him, or was every minute of her stay more dangerous? If she could only count on another twenty-four hours of security. By that time, if the Fates were kind, Jim and she would be entrenched in an unassailable position. Her eyes followed Mark to the door almost pityingly. Mark wasn't invulnerable, after all. He was paying part of the price right

now. Like Apollo's son, he had seized the reins of a fiery chariot and unable to loose them was plunging in flames to his own destruction. She sensed that he already knew it.

Then she remembered the stone terrace and poor, broken Julie, and her lips tightened. There would be no mercy in her when the time came. Mark turned at the door.

"You're forgiven," he nodded, and now his characteristic wry smile was set securely in place again. "Only remember that the last few days have been rather harrowing, and don't get into any more trouble. But we'll be able to leave tomorrow because Marta is up and about again, bustling as ever. Her headaches are severe but they don't last long."

"The house will be closed tomorrow?" Sandra tried to conceal her dismay. This cut her time a day shorter.

"Yes. Seems the servants want to get settled before Sunday. I find I can manage it. If you like you can go in the morning. Or perhaps you'd rather drive in town tomorrow evening with Marta and Becket. They'll stay until the last minute, but the rest of the staff will go in the morning."

"And you?"

"I'm taking the roadster right after lunch. I'd offer you a lift myself, but I shall be stopping along the way and don't know when I'll land in Boston. I've a dozen errands in Belsford first, digging up carpenters, caretakers, all that sort of thing. And you can't rush the natives around here. They want to visit and dicker."

Sandra hesitated. "If you don't mind, I think I'd rather take my time and go in town with Marta and Becket." He nodded and did not seem to find it odd that she was prolonging her stay to the last minute. Doubtless he felt that Marta

and Becket would be efficient guardians, Sandra reflected as she said good-night to him.

When the door closed behind Mark she sank back in her chair, feeling a relief that was almost vertigo. As far as she could judge, Mark was still unsuspicious. He was even leaving Willow Miles before she was. Sandra grew thoughtful and a trifle worried over that fact, for it seemed at odds with the constant surveillance to which she had been subjected. Of course one of Mark's "stops along the way" would be at the camp. Naturally he would go there to see how things were progressing. Or would he? After all, Boston was near, and if he chose he could run out any time. No, it wasn't likely after all that he would go to the camp, loaded as he'd be with personal luggage and important papers, for he would have to leave the car on the highway. Would he flaunt that powerful and conspicuous roadster outside a site which he had taken such pains to keep hidden? It would be at variance with all his former care if he did. For Sandra had a shrewd idea now what had been the goal of his early morning track exercises, that "four-mile run" of which Julie had spoken.

No, he wouldn't go to the camp with the car. She sighed with relief as she settled that fact to her satisfaction. And now for bed; she would have to rise very early.

13

SANDRA STIRRED AND MOANED as her traveling clock began a subdued whir from under the pillow. Out of twisted and fantastic dreams her mind stumbled and wakened to the darkness of the silent room. It couldn't be six o'clock. But when she struck a match, her sleepy eyes told her that that was the inexorable hour. She stretched and snuggled again to her warm pillow. It was, after all, a ridiculously early time to have set herself, for the household, even on this day, would hardly be awake yet. Then she forced herself to stagger out of bed and to the window.

Her room, with its north-western exposure, didn't know the light until later in the day, but by leaning far out she could see that the eastern sky was already rosy. In spite of the hour there seemed a faint new warmth in the air, and down below her the meadows steamed with a low, drifting mist that was rapidly dispersing even as she watched. The day promised to be clear, she saw gratefully. The whole success of Jim's plan depended on his taking his usual afternoon stroll toward the gate near the boulevard, and a pouring rain would doubtless make Jackson balk at the prospect. Moreover even when Jim had cajoled Jackson into it, Sandra could imagine how the jailer, wet and morose, would watch Jim's every move in his impatience to be back under shelter. No, it would be difficult to explore bushes with elaborate casualness in a pouring rain.

But the day would be clear, it must be. She shivered and

climbed back into bed, only for a few minutes of course, she promised herself, just long enough to preview the coming day.

Would she find a note in the bushes when she investigated later this afternoon? It must be there, for otherwise it would be difficult to get in touch with Jim after he had escaped from the camp. If there were no note, she would have to hang about that gate until late into the night, waiting for him to appear. Luxuriously and with tingling nerves she imagined in her mind the various steps of his escape. She saw his retrieving the scarf and file while Jackson sat and smoked in the background. Queer, how stupid she was deliberately conceiving Jackson to be! Still, Jim must have seen his way clear at this point or he wouldn't have suggested the plan. Then would come night, the night of this very day. Supper first for Jim, and the inevitable cards—and then seclusion in his own room. A little later he would climb out of his window and make his way to the boulevard gate.

Then would begin the work of that file, received from Jackson's own hands. How Jim would enjoy that touch of humor when he heard of it—if he had a sense of humor, she thought uneasily. How long did it take to file off a padlock? Maybe a chisel would have been better. But Jim had counted on the file to set him free tonight, and in those last words of his he had sounded fully alert.

She would be waiting outside the gate, perhaps with a car, if his note so instructed her. And then, . . . annoyed at finding herself at a point beyond which her imagination refused to take her, Sandra yawned again and her eyes closed.

It seemed but a moment or two later that she awoke for the second time. Sleep sounds had become translated into the reality of a heavy luggage truck throbbing beneath her win-

dow. She sprang up and looking out saw that a last trunk was being expeditiously lifted to an already crowded lorry. She gasped. By the activity outside and by the full daylight she realized that it must be nearly noon. The servants were already leaving. Her lips curled ruefully. Well, if the household had seemed strange to her, she at least could be accused of keeping the most erratic mealtimes in it! After her magnanimous announcement of how she meant to help Marta, Mark must be feeling a grim amusement at her absence from breakfast, particularly considering her escapade of the night before. It was really too bad. She didn't care what he felt, but she did rebuke herself for not conforming to strict hours today of all days. Marta was probably at her wit's ends, and taking it out on the girls. Well, they at any rate were through with this eerie place for good, so she could forgive herself. She must catch Angela and give her tips for the others and something very special for herself. She dressed and rushed from the room. The station wagon for the servants was already at the door and in the ensuing confusion she had just time to press some bills into the maid's hands with whispered instructions. Then the car started, carrying out of her sight Angela's excited and somewhat bewildered little face.

Lunch that day was a late and silent affair. Although it had been prepared exquisitely by Marta, and was equally well served by Becket, Sandra could eat little. The house with its horde of servants had been eerie enough, but the realization that this dining room held the only nucleus of life that remained here suddenly shocked Sandra from the almost light-headed assurance which she had been feeling.

Marta of course was in the kitchen, but the girl watched Becket closely as he moved silently back and forth from the

sideboard. She knew no more of this silent, black man than she had on the day of her arrival. What went on behind those sad, imperturbable eyes and under that deep, velvety voice? That he was indispensable to Mark she knew, as also the fact that he alone of the servants was to remain in personal service with his master.

Even Marta was to be pensioned after her long years in the Caldwell family.

The room seemed to press about her. Mark, Becket, Marta —what was she doing here along with this inscrutable three?

"Are you ill?" Mark asked solicitously. "You look a bit pale around the gills." Sandra set down her coffee cup with an unsteady hand.

"I got fearfully over-tired yesterday," she admitted, "and every once in a while my muscles tell me so."

"I know. That's why I wouldn't let them wake you." Presently he spoke again, settling back with his cigarette. "Marta and Becket will start covering furniture as soon as we're through here. They'll be at it all afternoon, so are you sure you want to wait for them? Even though I can't take you to Boston, I could run you down to the train."

Sandra shook her head. The suggestion was as alluring as it was impossible. She ached to be out of this place but she was still tied. "In spite of all my boasting, but because of my escapade yesterday, I haven't even started packing. Marta can do my room last, I won't be in her way. I suppose they're going before dinner?"

He nodded and rose. "You'll have to wait for your regular dinner until you reach Boston. At a late hour, I'm afraid. I'm leaving very shortly. Here's my club address. You can reach me easily, if you want to." She made no reply and he

went on, "Davenport expects to get in touch with you any day now. Where shall I tell him?"

Sandra pondered. "I don't know for sure. I'll have to let you know at your club."

He frowned a litte. "I wish I knew right now. I hate to see you simply vanish into the blue, even for only a day or so."

Her tone was light. "That's where I came from, and much to your annoyance, as I remember."

There was a little silence, and his tone was hesitant when he spoke again. "Well, Sandra, aren't you going to say good-by to me?"

"Good-by," Sandra said pleasantly. He stared down at her a moment. Then turned and left the room.

Fifteen minutes later, from the balcony over the hall, she watched the roadster whirl down the drive, and saw Becket hurry back into the house. Mark had left and it was strange to think that the next time she saw him it would probably be in the criminal courts. The thought didn't bring her as much pleasure as it might. Pretty soon I'll become one of those women who write gushing letters to convicted murderers, she thought impatiently.

Then she whirled about as she saw Marta coming down the hall, her arms piled with gray slip-covers.

"Let me help, Marta. I might as well make myself useful. Then we can all get away earlier." At least three hours to kill, she thought, before she'd dare go down to the forsythia bush looking for a message.

"Well, if you really mean it," Marta was a bit ungracious, doubtless recalling Sandra's erratic confusing of meal hours. The girl received the heavy pile in her arms and held it

patiently while the older woman gave explicit directions. Then she nodded and started down the corridor.

Three hours later the furniture was covered, the last bit of bric-a-brac tucked away, and the three stood in the great lower hall with their suitcases. Sandra also had a steamer trunk, which Marta regarded dubiously.

"You should have had that sent in the luggage van," she disapproved. "The car'll be crowded pretty close with all these things." Sandra looked properly apologetic.

"I'm so sorry," she began, when Marta interrupted.

"It can't even be done, Becket, unless the trunk goes on the top, and that'll ruin the car. You take the luggage and Mrs. Demarest along and I'll go by train. You can drop me at the station."

"I should say not," Sandra protested. "I'll go by train myself."

"But . . ."

"I'd really prefer it," she insisted, "I can take my luggage by train for that matter."

Marta was mollified. "That won't be necessary, Mrs. Demarest. With no one in the tonneau, Becket can pile it all in and leave it wherever you want in Boston."

"Don't think Mr. Caldwell would like it," Becket's velvety voice spoke for the first time. "He told us to take Mrs. Demarest right to Boston." His eyes rested on Marta significantly, but she only sniffed. Her angular old face was lined with weariness and irritation.

"Oh, for land's sakes, Becket, what difference does it make now? If Mrs. Demarest says it's more convenient for her this way, that's all there is to it. We can all squeeze into the front

seat as far as the station. Guess you could stand being crowded just that few minutes, ma'am?"

Sandra nodded and saw that the colored man's face relaxed. Evidently his chief objection had been to leaving her in the vicinity of Willow Miles. Well, what he didn't know wouldn't worry him.

"We'll wait 'til your train comes, Mrs. Demarest," Becket announced when they arrived at the station. "Only twenty minutes." But Sandra shook her head, rejoicing as she did so at the impatient frown on Marta's face.

"You're both tired, and there's no need for you to wait. It's dark already and you haven't had your dinner. Good-by, Marta. Good-by, Becket." She left a bill in each hand and after nodding brightly, turned on her heel and entered the tiny station. Perhaps her determination would settle the matter in spite of the fact that the two were evidently still arguing the merits of the case. Marta as usual won, for even as Sandra listened the big limousine began to hum, and presently moved swiftly out of hearing. She dropped limply on a bench and for the length of a cigarette faced the long walk ahead of her with a sad lack of heroic enthusiasm.

Then she looked up. The station agent who lived nearby, and who only sauntered over to the platform in time for the few trains that passed, had entered the room and cast an indifferent glance at her. "Can you tell me where I can get a taxi?" she asked, knowing the hopelessness of her request. He shook his head.

"Ain't any. Folks 'round here use their own cars. But if you're going up the line there's a bus that runs every two hours," he admitted reluctantly. "Where was it you said you was going?"

Sandra thought hastily. "Clear Valley."

"Whyn't you phone 'em? They'd come after you."

"Oh, I couldn't do that! I'm just a friend of one of the maids." His look became at the same time personal and more lofty.

"Well, as a matter of fact, it's an hour before the bus comes by. But I tell you what. My brother delivers milk and cream up to Davis' estate every night 'bout this time. He's got a Ford truck. He'd take you 'most of the way and," he paused, and regarding her thoughtfully after he had switched on another electric light, he continued, "I guess likely he wouldn't charge you much."

Velvety amber eyes above a small white face and crimson lips shone in a brief moment of mirth. Then Sandra demurely accepted the tribute. "Oh, I hope he will take me. Where can I find him?" He gestured largely.

"Right across the yard there. He's loading up now." And the agent immured himself in his small booth with no further look as though he had done his best for both the young lady and his brother, and washed his hands of the consequences. Before the last train came roaring through to Boston, Sandra was rattling her way along the boulevard in company with a smaller and much more voluble replica of the station agent.

For the first part of the drive she was able to make amiable response to her chauffeur's sallies. He asked little more than to be listened to, and scarcely waited for her vague replies, so the dialogue was no strain on her mind. But as every revolution of the wheels drew them nearer Willow Miles, she became more restive. Presently they had passed the great stone gates and now she must get some definite line on the distance she still had to go to reach her goal.

"This Willow Miles is a big estate, they say," she commented presently. The man had been proudly discoursing on the power and glory of the Davises, who, she judged, would have died in the sere and yellow leaf were it not for the rich cream he bore to their jaded palates nightly.

"Willow Miles is big enough," he grunted, "but mostly run to the wild. Folks shouldn't have land 'less they keep it up. Take their place here now," he gestured, "we're running alongside the biggest game preserve in these parts, gone to pot. It started back there a bit."

Sandra felt frantic anxiety. What excuse could she make to get out? But the car was moving inexorably along.

"If I was going up the line to where you're bound for, I could show you how far that game preserve runs, but I turn off just a little ways from here. But you can tell, because you follow this road right to Clear Valley, and the Caldwell land runs almost up to the Valley gates, miles of it. All gone to seed now. So's the family. I'd tell you about them, but here's where I got to drop you. Unless," he added thoughtfully, "you want to wait for me here and then I'd take you right to Clear Valley. I wouldn't be long, not more than fifteen minutes. I'd take you with me now, but the girls, the maids at the Davises. . . ." He stopped, embarrassed at the thought of the doubtful reception which would greet him should he appear with this strangely elegant young lady. Personal maid, she probably was. That kind always got the kitchen maids' backs up. He coughed, wishing he hadn't made the latter suggestion.

But Sandra had dismounted with celerity.

"Oh, no! But thank you so much."

The man stepped on the starter.

"That's all right, ma'am. Glad to have company." He turned into a side road, inwardly wondering what on earth had made him call the girl "ma'am." Sandra stepped out briskly, for she knew that she had not yet passed the spot which was her goal.

14

THE NIGHT HAD TURNED purple now, throwing dusky scarves across the road and Sandra knew she had been more than fortunate in having had swift transportation to this point. The only landmark she had been able to see the evening before was a solitary group of tall pines. Even against the night sky the trees had cast solid, cathedral-like pillars of shadow. She could hardly miss them now.

There they were, around the bend; her steps quickened. Fifty paces or so beyond the pines her handkerchief should be hanging from a bush. Had it been blown away or perhaps been picked up? Then she sighed with relief and ran forward.

A tiny spot of white waved triumphantly just ahead.

When she reached it she could see the inconspicuous path that led from the boulevard. Camouflaged as it was by tangled bushes, she most certainly would have missed it had it not been for the handkerchief. She threaded her way through the maze of bushes. A few steps beyond them the path was quite clear and led directly to the iron gates.

Sandra stopped and listened. Not a sound broke the silence except the whisper of wind that stirred the trees. She crept closer to the gate and peered through, but it was too dark to see whether the scarf and file had been removed. She bent over the forsythia bush which pressed against the barrier on her side of the gate. If there should be no note she would have to wait interminable hours of the night here in this

dreary spot; wait, perhaps, for someone who would never come.

She shivered and began to grope through the bush frantically. Her heart almost stopped beating as her fingers came into contact with something silky and smooth, something which was foreign to the forsythia's growth. Snatching the object out, she found that it was a man's dark silk tie, knotted at one end, and her hands shook as she untied it. A note, crumpled into a tiny ball, lay in her palm.

And now with her suspense partly relieved, Sandra felt the ominous uncertainty of her present position. She hurried back to the highway and knelt in the grass at its edge. She would have to use matches to read the note, and hastily, not to attract attention. The wind played with her anxiety, breathing fatally on the first two lights she achieved. Finally she managed to make a windbrake of her cupped palm, and in that brief moment her eyes took in the contents of the letter:

Dear Sandra:

I'm assuming I'll find the file when I leave this note. If all goes well I should be out of here sometime this evening. So after dark take a stroll in the vicinity of the terrace. I'll manage to signal you and we'll get to Boston somehow before morning.

One thing you must do. We'll need money badly. The safe in Mark's study generally has quite a bit in it. Remember it's my money. The combination has always been J-U-L-I-E. Open it and grab everything in sight, papers too. It will be interesting to see Mark's trustee reports. Don't bother to sort the papers. I'll take care of that later. I suppose Mark hasn't changed his habit of going to the laboratory right after dinner so you should have a clear field.

I'll wait until daylight for you. If anything happens to

delay you, you'll find me in the shed where the garden tools are kept.

JIM.

Sandra thrust the note into her handbag and started swiftly back toward Willow Miles.

Jim, of course, didn't know that the house was empty. Fortunate as that circumstance might be, Sandra felt that she would almost rather have made her venture with human dangers about her. The night, the lonely walk before her, didn't make the house seem any more inviting. Did she dare disobey orders and wait here for Jim? But there was no certainty that he would come here. Thoroughly familiar as he was with all parts of the estate, there were any number of short-cuts which he might take. No, she'd have to meet him on the terrace whose stones had held Julie's broken body. . . .

Almost without volition, she began to run. The abominable house wasn't through with her yet. How would she get in, locked as all the entrances were? No alternative but to break a window. That vandalism wouldn't matter anyway, for with the first daylight Jim's escape would be discovered.

The next few miles seemed shorter than they had the night before, perhaps because swiftly as she went, now striding, now running, her mind could not beat down her fear of the loneliness for which she was heading. Yet why was she afraid? Julie, silent but friendly, would walk beside her on the terrace, and every minute would bring Jim nearer.

The house loomed before her now, pressing its shape against the purple sky, much as she had seen it first. Only now there was not a single gleam from a single window. Sandra ran the last remaining distance and found herself on the terrace. Here, if anywhere, she could make entrance. According to

Becket, the village caretakers who would arrive in the morning had been entrusted with the task of placing the great iron shutters which would protect the french windows from trespassers. For this single night it had been thought safe to leave them merely locked, especially as the household's departure had been unheralded.

It was useless to try the windows. Sandra herself had watched Becket carefully testing them all. But along the edge of the terrace she found a row of empty earthen flower-pots. Without allowing herself to hesitate, she lifted the largest one and hurled it through one of the windows, close to the wrought-iron catch. The sound was unexpectedly slight, as though the room within had sucked the vibrations deep into its own silence. In another moment, by chipping away the jagged fragments of glass, Sandra could slide her arm in and slip the bolts.

Slowly the great glass doors swung open. The warmth that still clung in the room seemed like the hot breath of unseen faces. Sandra gulped twice and stepped inside.

She crossed the floor swiftly and as the light flooded to her touch on the switch, she drew a long breath. The room was empty, though she had forgotten how shrouded and shapeless the furniture would look. The hall door was closed, and with a single glance at the night outside she knelt by the safe.

J-U-L-I-E

Each click of the tumblers made her heart scurry faster. The combination hadn't been changed. In another minute she had swung the heavy door open and was peering into the interior. She had thoroughly resigned herself to finding the safe empty. Why on earth should Mark leave papers, jewels or money behind?

So now she almost felt dismay as she saw that a pile of letters and documents lay on one shelf, and that the great jewel case was still here. Had these things been left as an oversight in the sudden closing of the house and the confusion of moving Mark's laboratory papers? But if it had been an oversight, it was quite possible that he would return at any moment!

Sandra felt a sudden faintness. Since she had found these things, of course she had to follow Jim's instructions, but as she piled the papers hastily on the floor she wished from the bottom of her heart that Mark had not forgotten them. Morally right as her actions were, the hour and the circumstances conspired to flood her with a feeling of guilt.

She had no suitcase, of course. She would have to thrust as many papers as possible into her handbag and suit pockets; the jewel case she must carry. There was no money that she could see.

She looked down at the papers that lay at her feet. Vanity rebelled at gorging her pockets with this junk. And it wasn't necessary. She denuded a sofa pillow of its cover and tumbled the papers into the empty case. On top of them she put the jewel case, and tied the unwieldy bag together by its corners. She was still kneeling on the floor, giving the last touches to her task, when she heard a slight noise. Was it only the snap of a twig on the terrace?

Then before she could struggle to her feet, her face turned white and she froze into helpless terror. At the open french window Mark stood, looking at her with an amazement as complete as her own.

Not a word was spoken by either as he slowly crossed the room, but in his interminable progress she saw again how

tall he was, how strongly his arms swung from the broad shoulders. Perhaps Mephistopheles' face was carved into just such brown, lean planes. She still crouched there as he stooped and slowly unknotted the crude bag she had made. Then he lifted out the jewel case and looked at her gravely.

"Why, my dear, is it as bad as this? You had only to ask me for them . . ." He stopped, and as Sandra said nothing, he looked more closely into the bag's interior. As though dazed, he threw paper after paper out. It was then that he seized her arms and lifted her from the floor, holding her so that her eyes must meet his.

"Sandra, Sandra! What is this? For God's sake, tell me. I can't believe the sight of my eyes!"

Well, it had happened at last. All hope of concealment was lost now; there was only the chance that Jim would come before it was too late. She threw back her head.

"Mark Caldwell, liar—thief—murderer," she said and smiled a little. "But at least two of those things for the last time. Whatever happens to me, from now on you'll face the music."

His arms fell from her shoulders and folded across his chest. He was at least going to listen to her. She went on, lost now to all fear, the words pouring out mechanically.

"I knew when I came here that Jim was afraid of you. He had told me that. He knew that you were trying to get entire control of his money. He was even afraid for his physical safety. But I don't believe his wildest suspicions of you included the most hideous thing you have done, your murder of Julie!"

Mark suppressed an exclamation and stepped forward. There was a curious mingling of relief and horror in his face.

He gripped her hand and forced her to sit on the couch. Then he leaned forward and looked into her face.

"I can't listen to you, Sandra! It isn't fair to let you say things that will choke you to remember some time." Sandra hardly heard him for the drumming in her ears. Why she was not already gagged or bound was beyond her comprehension, but for once it seemed that Mark's maddening habit of deliberation was reacting to her advantage. And every moment was bringing Jim nearer.

"I'll have to ask you to hear me out. You needn't keep looking out the window. The grounds are empty and I know you're alone." He paused. "How the devil did I happen to leave the safe unlocked? Well, that doesn't matter now.

"The first thing I'm going to say is the worst. I'm sorry but there's no way I can soften it. Your husband, Jim Demarest, is a homicidal maniac. Yes—he's alive." Mark's face was somber. "It's a long story and I won't sicken you with all the details.

"My sister Ellen married a man who later became violently insane. Fortunately he died when Julie was small. Killed himself. But my sister's last years were just as full of anxiety. She knew before she died that Jim had inherited a tendency. He was erratic even in his teens. That's why she tried to make sure that neither of the children would marry until they were well into maturity, until the doctors could say any danger was past."

He paused, then said, "You don't believe me."

"No."

His face was very gentle. "Sandra, do you suppose any mother would have left any such will, without good reason?"

When she didn't answer he went on. "Of course the doc-

tors didn't want Jim or Julie to know about their father, or our worries. But when Jim got engaged without consulting me, I had to confide in the girl. She was splendid about it. Unlike Manning. But I'm afraid that broken engagement was the turning point for Jim. After that he was definitely unmanageable at times and I had to have him trailed constantly. God help me, I was so fond of him that I couldn't believe he needed to be confined."

There was a strangled gasp from Sandra as though somewhere in her mind the last fragment of a relentless mosaic were falling into place. Mark glanced at her and then averted his eyes. Her lips were so tightly locked that the warm scarlet had vanished.

"You called me a murderer, Sandra, and you were right. Jim had his first violent phase in Canada—and killed a man. That was my direct responsibility and I'll never be free of it. As it happened, the very circumstances made it obvious that Jim was insane. So there was no question of criminal action, provided I undertook to keep him confined permanently."

"Wait a minute, Mark," Sandra interrupted with a half-sob, "you're going too fast! Everything you say is just a horrible blur to me. Can't you start over again? Oh, not all the details. Just something very simple that I can take in without thinking about it. I can't think."

Mark looked at her sharply, then his voice softened. "I'll try. Last fall I was in Canada. The government had asked me to consult with some men there who were working along the same lines that I was. While I was there I had a wire from Jim. He said he was driving up to enlist, but that he had something very important to discuss with me first. Of course, now I know what it was—his marriage to you. But he never

had a chance to tell me. He was en route so I couldn't stop him. I could only hope the man detailed to shadow him was on the job. Jim had eluded him once or twice before. One of those times, Sandra, must have been during his days in Cambridge with you, for I never had a report on it.

"Well, the chap had picked up Jim's trail again and was following him. But he wasn't there in time to keep Jim from killing a gas station attendant. An argument about coupons, an utterly senseless murder. Not really murder of course. An insane man can't commit murder!" Mark's voice shook a little. "The Canadian authorities were very kind, very understanding. And the family of the man who was killed was more than decent. Jim was released into my care and I brought him back to the States."

"How did Jim take it? I mean, how is he?" Sandra's voice was very small.

"There had been a scuffle. He'd been hurt himself. There was a mild concussion but even when he'd recovered from that he seemed content to live in an escapist world. It's the happiest thing for him of course. His lucid intervals are growing fewer and shorter. It's hard to know what he remembers. Even for an alienist it's almost impossible to plumb a twisted mind like that. But he seems content nowadays, as I said. And his physical health is superb."

"Oh, Mark—Mark—" Sandra's hands engulfed her face. "Why did you have to be so tortuous about it all? About something that no one could blame anyone for, even poor Jim himself?"

Mark's laugh was bitter. "I've wondered myself sometimes, but I suppose with a second chance I'd do the same thing again. Charles was frantic about the whole thing. Who'd

want a Supreme Court justice who has had two homicidal maniacs in his family?"

"But he didn't have! It was Demarest blood, not Caldwell! It doesn't touch either of you at all!"

"How many people, particularly among Charles' enemies, would have bothered to point that out? You read a sensational news story on a front page, Sandra. Three months later, do you even notice the explanation or retraction on a back page?"

She was silent.

"But I'm not fair to Charles," he added abruptly. "It was for Julie mainly. We couldn't put that fear in her mind, if there were to be any hope for her own sanity. The alienists have always been very definite on that point." He mimicked some invisible specialist savagely. "Julie must live the life of a vegetable. Fresh air, exercise. No excitement, social or otherwise, until she was well through her twenties. Julie, the most volatile, sociable little person in the world! An easy program to lay out for me! But first and last she mustn't know anything at all about her father and Jim. And she never did know, thank God!"

"Marta and Becket knew," Sandra said suddenly, and he looked relieved, as though her long silence had shaken him.

"Yes, they knew. And of course the two people who take care of Jim. An orderly and a woman trained in asylum work—"

"And the undertaker, Mr. Haskell, who staged the mock funeral," Sandra went on evenly, "and Dr. Reynolds who signed the death certificate."

Mark said: "I don't know how you knew that and I don't give a hoot at the moment. But don't get the wrong idea

about Reynolds. He's the finest chap in the world and he loved the children. He did what he thought was right, for Julie's sake. I couldn't offer him money as I did Haskell. He'd have thrown it in my face. But I did invent a grateful patient who died leaving him a legacy."

So that was it, Sandra thought, through the fog of her amazement. Mark stared down at her bemused face. "Don't you see we had to go through this thing for Julie, as much as for Charles?" he demanded fiercely. When she didn't answer, he stumbled on. "Jim was confined in the laboratory during the winter months but we couldn't go on making excuses for his 'absence' and the lack of letters from him. His friends were beginning to ask questions and Julie pestered me day and night. So I just announced one day that Jim had returned late the night before, ill with pneumonia. You know the rest. And if it's any satisfaction to you, you gave me the worst shock of my life when you turned up as Jim's widow. And I've had a few shocks in my time."

No, it's no satisfaction to me, Sandra thought dully. Not if what you say is true. But how can I know what is true? There have been too many turns to the path, too many.

As though he read her answer, Mark went to the pile of papers and came back to her, drawing several official-looking documents from their long envelopes. He tossed them into her lap. "If you still don't believe me," he said in a kind of despair, "maybe these court and commitment papers will convince you. These are reputable alienists, reputable judges. You can check them at any time."

He hesitated over another paper that he still held, but his eyes were deeply kind as he finally handed it to her.

"I know how conscientiously you take the fact that you're

still Jim's wife, Sandra. Perhaps reading this will make you feel better, to know that in one completely sane moment Jim put himself into my hands unreservedly, to know that he himself thoroughly approved of the funeral farce, for Julie's sake."

He cleared his throat as though his voice had roughened. "I said it was difficult to know just how much he remembers now. But don't ever forget that Jim was really decent. In that moment of full sanity he voluntarily judged and condemned himself to a lifetime imprisonment to spare Julie, to protect Charles and to make the whole ghastly business as tolerable as possible for me."

Sandra opened the paper. Anything to release Mark from an emotion she had not dreamed he was capable of feeling.

"Dear Mark," the letter began, "I'm not so sure as you are that sometime in the future you won't have trouble over this funeral hoax. And if that time comes, I'll probably be beyond helping you, or wanting to help you. Even as it is, it seems to me there is something else you should know, something that it's vital for you to know, but I can't remember. Forgive me for not remembering."

Sandra glanced up swiftly. "His marriage," she whispered. "He was trying to remember his marriage." Odd, she thought, that she had used the pronoun "his" instead of "our". But this was the letter of a pitiful and remote stranger.

The following paragraphs were formal, expressing the writer's confidence in Mark, his approval of the mock funeral as a means of shielding Julie from the knowledge of his mental condition, and voluntarily committing his person "and any necessary restriction of my physical liberty" to Mark's discretion. Below the firm signature there was a rather shaky

postscript: "I know you'll keep Julie happy and safe. It's the only thing I have left."

After a long and dreadful moment of full comprehension, Sandra laid the letter gently on the couch beside her. She didn't need to glance at the official, taped documents and now they slid upheeded from her lap to the floor.

"I believe you," she said, and added faintly, "but what happened to Julie, Mark? I know she wasn't trying to elope."

"No," he said, "not that night. I guessed from a note intercepted to Manning that she might plan to, very shortly. So I told Becket to put padlocks on her doors. Apparently she walked out of one door while he was fastening a padlock to the other. Evidently she got into the laboratory wing through the connecting closet from Jim's room. But to this day I don't know why." Mark's hand went out as Sandra gasped, then it dropped to his side again. "We had moved Jim to his summer quarters a day or two before. He'd had a few bad spells and had been very noisy."

"Julie heard him once, didn't she? And you pretended she had been dreaming. Remember?"

"I remember," Mark nodded grimly. "We moved him to the camp in a hurry after that. Well, anyway, Jackson had come up to get some instructions the night Julie died. We were in an inner room when we heard someone in the laboratory itself.

"I don't know why Julie was so frightened when we came in, though of course the room was dark. Anyway, she grabbed the first thing at hand—it proved to be a measuring pitcher—and threw it at us. A wild throw. It went through the skylight. I switched on the lights as quickly as possible but unfortunately she saw Jackson first. I suppose with that

beard of his he looked like an ogre out of a fairy-tale. Julie screamed and dashed for the nearest door and pushed it open before we could reach her."

Mark's lips tightened. "It was the door to the laboratory freight elevator. She fell thirty feet down the open shaft. . . ." There was a weighted silence. "We had to give a different explanation of her death."

"But why—why?"

"If we'd told the truth, Jackson would have had to testify. He isn't a native of these parts, he's from New York state. There'd have been the inevitable questions, where did he live, who employed him, what was his employment? They'd have checked every answer since Jackson is a stranger, and all of those answers would have led straight to the camp, and to Jim. The whole miserable scheme that Charles and I thought was so fool-proof would have fallen to pieces. And it would have fallen with a crash that would have made every front page in the country."

"Couldn't you have left Jackson right out of the picture?"

His voice was tired. "It would have been pretty inadequate, wouldn't it, to have said that my own niece was so frightened at something in the laboratory that she hurled herself down the shaft right in front of my eyes? They'd have asked, What had I said to her? Why was she so scared? My God, Sandra, I myself don't even know why she was in such a state! From the way she acted, Jackson wasn't the cause, he was simply the final straw. You see, she threw the pitcher before she saw him! I keep asking myself why, why?"

Sandra staggered up from the couch. "I killed her," she said. "I killed her with my lies."

Mark's face crumpled with a tragic question. "You mean

that you told her, told Julie, what you believed about me?" Sandra nodded and her hand went out blindly to rest on his arm. He swallowed audibly but after a moment his fingers folded over hers. "Well," he said, "that explains it. And perhaps it doesn't matter now." His voice was even, as though he were consoling a child. Mark consoling her, Sandra, for adding burden after burden to his already crushing load! It was unendurable but it would have to be endured. And more too.

After a moment he said steadily, "If that was the case, it seems unfair to Julie that we pretended her death took place in another way. But it was all we could think of with so little time to think. Obviously she had fallen from a considerable height, her body showed that. And she had talked so openly of her infatuation for Manning, even before the servants, she'd threatened so often to run away, that we knew none of the staff would question our story. Of course Marta and Becket knew the truth."

"Marta didn't pack Julie's bag. You did," Sandra said in a low voice.

"How did you know?" But Mark was actually beyond any curiosity now. "Yes, I packed it. Marta was completely crushed. She adored Julie." Mark swayed a little and Sandra's hand tightened convulsively on his arm. "I don't know," he said drearily, "thinking back over it now I can see that perhaps we needn't have gone through all that mummery about Julie's death. I could have said that I had imported Jackson to build up the game preserve again. We could have moved Jim somewhere else for a time. I could have thought up some excuse for Julie's fright in the laboratory. Oh, it's easy now to look back and see what we could have done. But

I couldn't think sensibly that night." His face worked. "I couldn't think of anything except that I had lost Julie."

His voice broke, finally and dreadfully.

Sandra's hands slid up his arms and locked behind his neck. "Mark, don't look like that. Don't. Oh, my poor darling!"

He stared at her unbelievingly for a moment, then his own arms went uncertainly around her waist. "You mean that? You're not just sorry for me? I don't believe I could stand that, Sandra. Not now." Her look must have answered him for his lips found her mouth wonderingly. And then in a crushing pressure.

Long moments went by, moments only punctured with incoherent phrases. Finally there was a stifled laugh from Sandra and she pulled her head away. "Please, Mark! I have to breathe once in a while!"

"Only two inches away and for only two minutes," he said firmly, without loosening his arms. But her face was adamantly hidden on his shoulder, so he sighed and grumbled, "Talking is such a waste of time, but all right. I said I'd give you two minutes." His voice was close to the curls above her ear. "Good thing you're a suspicious character, darling, or I'd never have come back here. I was talking to Doc Reynolds this evening and he said you had called on him. He also said Becket had phoned a message that he and Marta hadn't waited for you to take your train."

"And so—?"

"And so I thought I'd hop over to the station and find out. The station master said a wench of your general description had hitch-hiked a ride in a milk truck back in this direction.

And here I am. Do you really love me? You haven't said so yet."

"You needn't give me a drug to get the low-down on that," Sandra murmured and added sternly, "aren't you ashamed of yourself for such tactics?"

His voice was low. "No, I had to know whether you were telling the truth when you said you hadn't lived with Jim. If there had been any possibility of a child with Jim's inheritance I'd have had to tell you the whole story." His voice lightened. "The only thing I'm ashamed of as a chemist, is that I gave you too much of my private concoction. You passed out before I could ask any more questions." His head bent, seeking her lips again. "You've asked a lot of questions, darling. Some time when we have more leisure than I can spare at the moment, you might tell me how come you're ransacking my ancestral manse."

She froze in his arms. Her heart, already rapid, began to lurch and pound. "Oh, my God, Mark, I've forgotten the most important thing of all!"

His lips grazed her cheek. "More important than this?"

She wrenched herself away. "Yes, yes! Mark, I managed to get a file to Jim. He's probably almost free this minute!"

As he stared down at her with a grotesquely amazed face, she hurried on: "Don't ask questions now! How I knew where Jim is and how I did it and all that. This is urgent, Mark, horribly urgent! We must get to the camp right away!"

Then all of a sudden Mark was entirely different. He was brisk and assured. "Okay, no questions. But you're to stay here. Put up your toes on the couch and take it easy. You've gone through quite enough today."

"Oh, please take me with you. Jim might be here any

minute!" Sandra's voice was almost a wail as she followed him to the terrace.

"Not a chance, darling, you don't know Jackson. But Jackson knows all the tricks. Don't worry—" he was running across the terrace to the car.

"So Jackson knows all the tricks, does he? Well, I put one trick over that he didn't know!" But the car motor was already racing. For the first time Sandra felt quite utterly, normally and simply irate with Mark. She screamed after him in the best fish-wife tradition.

"Don't be so stubborn! Don't know everything all the time!"

But the car was hurtling down the drive. She re-entered the house so abruptly that she fell over a hassock. It was some comfort to kick it rather thoroughly.

15

THE LIGHTS WERE STILL blazing. She switched them off and closed the shattered french window.

Now in the darkness everything fell away: the past days, even this past half-hour that marked a new beginning. All that was left was the skeleton of the present moment and the present fear. She tried to believe in Mark's assurance that Jim couldn't escape Jackson's vigilance but it was difficult, remembering her own experience at the camp.

She would feel more comfortable in the great stone hall, with all its exits. As she groped her way to the settle by the fireplace she had a comforting thought: Jim didn't know the house was empty. He didn't know the french window was broken. He might prowl around the terrace, but he wouldn't attempt to enter the house.

She sat there waiting. Waiting. And presently she was calm enough to analyze the eerie language of the old house: the tick of the great clock, the creak of the balcony railing protesting here and there in its ancient joints, the flutter of papers in the room beyond as the breeze from the broken window stirred them. She told herself reasonably that as long as sounds can be explained they needn't be feared. . . .

Even as her palms relaxed in that assurance she heard someone trying the french window in the other room. She sat very still, even her breathing suspended. She knew the explanation of that sound and that explanation didn't comfort her. It congealed her blood. From clear across the flagged

hall she could hear clicking sounds as the broken doors were pushed back. There was a crunch of broken glass. Footsteps moved haltingly across the inner room, reached the hall door. Then came a low whisper.

"Sandra! Sandra!"

That voice wasn't terrifying. It was sad and ghostly, reaching out from an inner darkness more profound than the physical gloom that concealed the speaker. The voice groped for her again. Fearfully. "Sandra!"

She rose and walked directly across the space between them. A few feet from the man she spoke quietly: "Yes, Jim. I was sure you'd make it."

He moved toward her and touched her face lightly as though to assure himself of her identity, then he scratched a match. For a few seconds they studied each other across that pale flicker of light—two tense, strained faces, oddly distorted by the shadows. Then the light died.

"There is no one here," she said evenly. "Everyone left today and the house is closed. I broke in to get at the safe. I think it would be all right to turn on a light." As she spoke, she moved away from him and pressed a button. One of the wall-scones beneath the balcony sent a pale bloom into the room.

She saw that the man's breath still came in gasps, that his face and hands were torn and scratched with brambles. But his eyes were exultant.

"We've done it, Sandra, by God, we've done it! What's the matter? You look ghastly."

"I feel ghastly," she said faintly, almost collapsing into a near-by chair. "It's been pretty weird breaking into this empty house and waiting for you."

He rubbed his hands together nervously.

"We mustn't stay too long. Did you find anything in the safe?"

"Yes. There was no money, but there's a jewel case and a lot of papers. Since I didn't have any idea what things you'd want, I piled them all together and left them for you to look through."

He eyed her thoughtfully.

"That was sensible. And there's not a soul around the place, eh!"

"No one."

"Good. Well, I'll go in there and get the things together and then we'll light out. We'll compare notes later, but I don't think this neighborhood will be healthy for long. Where are you going?" For Sandra had risen and was walking toward the stair.

Her tone was quite prosaic as she replied.

"It just occurred to me that I might find an old suitcase somewhere upstairs that we could pack the things in."

"Oh, good girl. I'll be sorting out the papers."

Sandra pressed the button that illuminated the corridor above and then ascended the stairs at a reasonable pace, though her shoulders twitched with the impact of the eyes that were following her progress. Once around the bend in the hall she flew into a front room and opened the shutter. There was no sound of a motor, no gleam of an approaching light. But like Bluebeard's wife she looked again and again. Then she turned back.

Should she barricade herself in some room, or would that be the most incautious move of all? So far, the man below had no suspicion of her good faith. It only remained to keep

him amiable until Mark returned. And that wouldn't be too long for already he must have discovered Jim's escape.

She walked out on the balcony again, switching off the corridor light that revealed her, and looked over the rail. Then her whole body seemed to freeze into stone.

His back toward her, and unconscious of her scrutiny, the man was silently padding his stockingless way across the flagged hall toward the stairs. In his every step was venomous stealth, and his shadow, cast by the single light below, monstrously climbed the entire wall and touched the balcony.

With staring eyes Sandra saw that he held some loose papers in his hand. Her realization of what had happened was as swift as it was terrible. Jim had found his commitment papers, and worse still, the letter he had written to Mark. He had been hurled out of his dream world, faced, in this semi-lucid moment, with the knowledge his tormented mind had so wisely concealed from him, that he had killed, that he never again could know legal freedom.

Sandra had done this to him, and she had done an even more hideous thing there at the camp. She knew it now. When, in her self-righteous ignorance she had told him of Julie's "murder," she had ripped the last protective insulation from Jim's mind, left it raw to the wind of distorted instincts. That gentle noble letter of his—he wanted to destroy it now, he wanted to crush and trample the last decency of a man who had once been Jim Demarest. She felt an aching self-contempt and an even more aching pity for the skulking figure below her. But only for an instant. Sheer terror immediately cancelled it. This wasn't Jim Demarest any more. Jim had made a last and gallant adieu in a letter long long ago. This animal was simply and terrifyingly homicidal man. The man knew

she had seen those papers, for they were the only ones discarded from their envelopes. In his mind she was one with the enemy now. By her very existence he had everything to lose and nothing to gain. This woman, this alien wife was no longer an accomplice but an obstacle, and by the furtiveness with which he took each quiet step it was evident that his fear and anger had crowded all other emotion from his crazed mind. Sandra saw instantly what mad scheme was possessing him. The man thought she was the only person aware of his whereabouts. If she were silenced he still had hope of escape.

So now as the man was midway of the stair, she began to edge further along the balcony which completely encircled the hall, her hands tight on the rail, lest in her faintness she should stumble. She watched with agonized vertigo every step that he took, his very deliberation adding to her torture. At the top landing he glanced around and then vanished down the corridor which led through the main house. This was her moment to reach the stair. Sandra moved swiftly now from the deep shadow where she had crouched, but she had taken only a few steps when he reappeared.

He stood at the head of the stairs, looking directly across the shadowed chasm between them. Did he see her? Then he spoke.

"What are you playing hide and seek for, Sandra? Come here." She did not answer, for she couldn't be sure that his words were not a trick to make her betray herself.

"Come here," he wheedled, "I see you. What are you afraid of? You looked at some of those papers, my dear, didn't you? You don't believe them, do you? I'm as sane as you are! Why it's you that are crazy hiding away from me. . . . All right, I'll come to you."

But she saw that he took the left-hand turn along the balcony, which was at a greater distance from her than was the other. This move made her hope that she was still invisible. Slowly the horrible, ridiculous procession began. With every step that the man took Sandra crept a corresponding one, keeping always on the opposite side of the balcony. But quickly she saw that while at first he had been faintly silhouetted against what dim glow came from the single bulb beneath the balcony, now she herself was drawing near the lighted portion, even though it brought her in greater proximity to the stair.

She could no longer see even his shadow and in all probability he would soon discover her. He might be moving more swiftly now, if he realized his advantage. Then the breathless silence was broken by the sound of a motor.

It hummed loudly and more loudly up the drive and halted with a harsh squeal of brakes. In the same instant, Sandra heard the man behind her abandon all pretense of quiet and spring forward. He had been even closer than she had feared. She heard the choked words that came from his tightly clenched teeth.

"So you sent for them, you little double-crosser! I'll get you for that!"

But Sandra's move had been but a fraction of a second behind the man's. With a suffocated scream she flew toward the stair and raced down it. Would Mark never come? Wildly she glanced up without pausing in her flight and saw that the man was about to swing himself over the balcony. He meant to drop from it and intercept her!

The railing cracked. There came a brittle, normal cry of

human dismay. Then he fell, fell and rolled almost to her feet.

For the eternity of a moment the room lay in silence, a queer silence in which were heard only the ticking of the great clock in a far corner and Sandra's own gasping breath, as she gazed down on the floor. No breath or sound came from the distorted body there.

Then suddenly the room seemed full of people. It was confusing, she thought resentfully, for Mark and Jackson and Mrs. Laidell to have nine faces, instead of three. But Mark's arms were around her before she fell, and the giddy multiple images whirled away into a grateful emptiness and silence.

Mark retrieved Sandra's handbag for the third time, lit a cigarette and sat back to look with some satisfaction at the landscape unrolling past the compartment windows.

"But who taught you to play poker?" he asked again.

"Grandfather."

He laughed and then sobered. "I suppose you miss him still."

She nodded with a little twinkle in her eyes. "But it won't be long now. He's in Florida, recuperating from a bad bout of pneumonia."

Mark stared at her. "You mean the old boy is still alive?"

She was demure. "Certainly. He makes a habit of not dying."

"Well, I'm damned! I thought it was odd of you to want a Florida honeymoon at this time of year. Now I know. Why haven't you told me before?"

"When you were my pin-up villain, it seemed wise to keep grandfather as a sort of ace in the hole. To threaten you with,

if I had to. Not that the poor darling would have been any real good that way, he was far too ill to be told anything. And then afterward I thought it would be fun to surprise you." Her lashes flashed up at him. "It may be salutary for you to know you're not the only male in my life!"

Mark killed his cigarette and then his hand cupped her elbow jealously. "You won't give him all your time?"

"That," Sandra's voice was judicial, "depends on how interesting my husband turns out to be."

But her eyes weren't teasing as Mark clamped his arms around her. One didn't tease Mark when he was in this mood.

THE END

Cry Wolf

(continued from front flap)

ancestral home. She arrived in time for his funeral, and from the moment she set foot in the gloomy mansion she sensed disturbing undercurrents—forewarnings of an ever-rising tide of suspicion and fear.

There was Julie, Jim's lovely mercurial sister, virtually a prisoner of her uncle, Mark Caldwell. There was Marta, ostensibly housekeeper, but more nearly a warden who rarely let Julie out of her sight. And, finally, there was Mark himself, a darkly handsome man of such charm and ease of manner that Sandra was nearly put off guard. . . .

Mrs. Carleton has mixed an ominous situation with plausibility, added a dash of bitters, and the result is guaranteed to chill the marrow of your bones.

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MARJORIE CARLETON

Joseph Branzetti

There seems to be no end to Mrs. Carleton's accomplishments. To begin with, at the age of eleven, she had a short story published — an impetus that has kept her writing in spite of eight brothers and sisters, college, marriage, and the bringing up of a son. Besides short stories and radio scripts, she has three published novels to her credit as well as several plays — and not content with the life of a scribe, she's done a good deal of composing, both classical and popular.

"My home," she says, "is a big, comfortably shabby mid-Victorian house in the heart of Newtonville near Boston. The mansard effect is more than compensated fo by the ample land — enough for croquet, badminton, and or the flower gardens I always intend to plant and never do."

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